

On Virtuously Attaining Truth

Bruno Niederbacher, Innsbruck

1. Introduction

Recently, Linda Zagzebski developed an account of cognizers as agents. "An effective agent is reliably successful in reaching her ends and she does so through the exercise of her own power" (Zagzebski 2001, 151). Knowledge is thought of as the result of virtuous agency. Knowledge is a state of true belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue. X is an act of intellectual virtue A (for example: thoroughness, open-mindedness) if and only if

- (i) x arises from the motivational component of A,
- (ii) x is something a person with virtue A would (probably) do in the circumstances,
- (iii) x is successful in achieving the end of the A motivation and finally truth, because of the features (i) and (ii) (Zagzebski 1996, 270-271).

Zagzebski claims that her explication of the concept of knowledge is able to exclude Gettier cases from being knowledge. Gettier problems, so we are told, arise for every analysis of knowledge which maintains that knowledge is true belief plus something else that does not entail truth (Zagzebski 1996, 283). In Gettier cases condition (iii) is not satisfied. One reaches a belief because of one's intellectually virtuous motivations and activities, but one does not reach the truth because of these features of the cognitive situation. Consider the case of the physician Dr. Jones who diagnoses that patient Smith is suffering from a certain virus x on the basis of characteristic symptoms. However, in this case the symptoms are due to something else, but as it happens Smith has indeed contracted very recently virus x, but so recently that he does not yet exhibit symptoms caused by x. If one is prepared to speak of knowledge in such cases the question arises: Why does Dr. Jones in this case not know that Smith suffers from virus x? The answer according to Zagzebski would be: Because Dr. Jones, although motivated to gain knowledge and using methods known reliably to lead to knowledge, does not reach the truth of her belief *because of* her virtuous motivation and procedure. The truth-attainment is not attributable to the agent.

William Alston (2000, 188) speaks of an "ingenious way of handling Gettier problems". The requirement that "the belief's being true is due to the virtuous motivation" prevents "the gap between what makes the belief true and what gives rise to its being formed that is characteristic of Gettier cases."

Ernest Sosa (2002) makes a similar suggestion to Zagzebski's: "So in order for correct belief to be attributable to you as your doing, the being true of your believing must derive sufficiently from 'yourself' ... " And a bit later: "What we prefer is the deed of true believing, where not only the believing but also its truth is attributable to the agent as his or her own doing."

In the article "What is knowledge?" Zagzebski (1999, 111) says that we do have an intuition of what could be meant by the formulation "truth is achieved because of the virtuous motivation and procedure", but she concedes that she does not know of an analysis of the *because-of*-relation that is adequate.

In this paper I want to raise the questions of what could be meant by such phrases as "attaining the truth", "attaining the truth because of virtuous motivations and procedures". My suspicion is that no adequate account of the *because-of*-relation can be found. I will try to explain why this is so and what it is that misleads to the idea of a causal connection between the virtuous motivation and activities and the truth of the belief.

2. The meaning of the phrase "attaining the truth"

The simplest way to understand the phrase "Dr. Jones attains the truth" would be to say:

- (i) Dr. Jones acquires a true belief.

The word "belief" is ambiguous. With the word "belief" one might refer to the intentional content of the belief; or one might refer to the state a person is in, the relation she has towards the content in question. (A third referent of "belief", which I do not consider here, would be the act of believing or assenting to a proposition.) For the sake of clarity, I will use from now on "belief" only for the state or disposition a person is in; in order to refer to the content I will use "p" for "proposition". Thus we change (i) and write:

- (ii) Dr. Jones acquires the belief that p, and p is true.

Here the Gettier-problem arises. Dr. Jones might virtuously acquire the belief that p, and p might be true, but the being true of p might be unconnected with the virtuous procedure of Dr. Jones. To avoid having to let such cases count as knowledge, Zagzebski demands that there should be a *because-of*-relation between the virtuous motivation and activities and the truth-attainment. The problem is to spell out the connection between the agency and the being true of a belief.

3. The meaning of the phrase "attaining the truth because of virtuous motivation and procedure"

The phrase could be spelled out in the following way:

- (iii) p is true because Dr. Jones virtuously believes that p.

There are two ways one could understand (iii). First in the sense in which one says: The weather changes because the barometer fell. However, this would not be an interpretation of the *because-of*-relation which Zagzebski needs, because in this interpretation the virtuous believer is only a criterion that p is true. Secondly, one could understand (iii) in terms of an epistemic conception of truth. However, the traditional analysis of the concept of knowledge presupposes a realistic conception of truth. Moreover, in the writings of Zagzebski I have found no signs of commitment to an epistemic conception of truth. On a realistic conception of truth, p is true because it is the case that p. The agent is not the truth-maker. Thus I exclude (iii) as a proper interpretation of the *because-of*-relation. Another way to understand the phrase would be:

- (iv) p is believed by Dr. Jones because of her virtuous motivation and activities.

This interpretation has to be excluded as well because in our case it is exactly that what Dr. Jones is doing. In order to see where the problem lies, we have to look at the particular reasoning process of Dr. Jones:

- (a) A patient exhibits symptom X, if and only if the patient suffers from virus x.
- (b) Smith exhibits symptom X.
- (c) Smith suffers from virus x.

This is one of the Gettier cases which work *via* an explicit or implicit inference (Swinburne 2001, 193). Dr. Jones is justified in believing (a), since no case was known in which a patient exhibited X without having contracted virus x, but (a) is false. Zagzebski would have to say that in the reasoning process of Dr. Jones one non-virtuous act is involved, that is, one act which is not successful in achieving a true belief. However, this amounts just to the old solution that one does not know if one gets a true proposition *via* false propositions. I do not see that the appeal to agency, intellectual virtuous motivation and activity does anything to solve the problem.

4. What leads astray

I want to consider what it could be that leads to the idea that there is a chain, reaching from the agent to the truth of the belief.

We know of the Frankfurt-style counterexamples against the validity of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), in which a person P freely brings about a state of affairs S, although there is some mechanism that would have operated to bring it about that P would have brought about S, if P had not done it by herself. The person is judged to be morally responsible for her act. One accounts best for these cases if one introduces agent causality. The person is held responsible because the causal chain starting from her as agent and leading to the event in question is not interrupted.

We know of the tricky cases of wayward causation. Tim wants to kill his uncle, and he believes that he can find him at home. His decision to kill his uncle so agitates him that he drives recklessly. He hits and kills a pedestrian, who by chance is his uncle. The killing was an accidental consequence of what Tim did. If one believes in agent causality one is able to handle such cases in a plausible way (Meixner 2001, 354). If one believes only in event causality one is at pains to explain the difference between the killing which is brought about by Tim intentionally, and the killing which is brought about by Tim only accidentally. The causal chain deriving from Tim as agent does not hook up to the event of the uncle's killing.

Finally, there is another case, inspired by Sosa (2002): Suppose Emma is an archer. She aims to hit the bull's-eye. She is a good archer, she has got the skill of archery. She hits the bull's eye because of a skilful shot. She is a real star at shooting and is 99 % reliably successful. One day she wants again to win the prize. She wants to hit the bull's eye; she uses her skill of archery. However, at the very moment she shoots, an unforeseeable gust drives the arrow to one side. If there had not been this gust, Emma would have hit the bull's eye. But now the arrow goes astray. Now suppose that this incident of bad luck is cancelled out by another incident of good luck: a strange gust from the other direction brings the arrow in line and

the arrow lands finally in the bull's eye. Emma achieves a winning shot. But the hitting of the bull's eye would not be attributable to her. She wanted to hit the bull's eye, her shot was just as perfect as ever; but the hitting of the bull's eye did not occur because of these features of the act. She did not hit the bull's eye because of her skill. Other causes, which are not under her control, were at work as well. The hitting of the bull's eye was an accidental consequence of what Emma did.

"Hitting the bull's eye" sounds like "attaining the truth", and one might think that the epistemic case is similar to such cases. The idea would be: The chain which relates the agent to the truth of the belief must not be interrupted, neither through other event-causes, nor through other agents. Why does this sort of reasoning not work for the quoted epistemic case? My answer is already indicated. I distinguish between the mental state of believing and the content of the belief. The mental state is what is brought about by agent causation. However, in the Gettier-case it is not the causal chain which is interrupted, or bypassed. It is the logical relation between the contents which produces the problem. This would explain why one is unable to find an adequate account of the because-of-relation between the cognizer as agent and the achieving of the truth.

5. A useful distinction

When Thomas Aquinas considers the relation between will and intellect, he utilizes the distinction between the exercise of an act and the specification of an act.

"[...] we must take note that the act of the reason may be considered in two ways. First, as to the exercise of the act. And considered thus, the act of the reason can always be commanded: as when one is told to be attentive, and to use one's reason. Secondly, as to the object; in respect of which two acts of the reason have to be noticed. One is the act whereby it apprehends the truth about something. This act is not in our power: because it happens in virtue of a natural or supernatural light. Consequently in this respect, the act of the reason is not in our power, and cannot be commanded. The other act of the reason is that whereby it assents to what it apprehends. If, therefore, that which the reason apprehends is such that it naturally assents thereto, e.g. the first principles, it is not in our power to assent or dissent to the like: assent follows naturally, and consequently, properly speaking, is not subject to our command. But some things which are apprehended do not convince the intellect to such an extent as not to leave it free to assent or dissent, or at least suspend its assent or dissent, on account of some cause or other; and in such things assent or dissent is in our power, and is subject to our command." (ST I II 17, 6)

The exercise of cognitive powers and virtues is within our power. But the determination of the act is only in some restricted cases within our power. It is within my power to open or shut the eyes. But it is not within my power to determine that I see green instead of red. It is within my power to make a research and to use scientific syllogisms. However, it is not within my power that I get as a result p instead of q. Aquinas thinks that there is a class of objects of cognition which are also *quantum ad determinationem actus* under a certain voluntary control. He thinks that the objects of religious belief are of that kind. Probably he thinks also that some contingent objects of cognition are of that kind, for example the belief that Emma is arrogant.

6. Conclusion

If such distinctions could be intelligibly defended - and I think that they could - one would have to give up the idea that all cognitive virtues are either a subclass of the moral virtues or that all cognitive virtues are entirely different from moral virtues. Secondly, one would have to give up the idea that knowledge is a univocal concept which we try to analyse.

Engaging agent causality in epistemology has some advantages, especially for giving an adequate account for those procedures of belief-acquisition and beliefs which are objects of praise and blame. However, it seems to me that the utilisation of the concept of the agent is of no help for dealing with the case of Dr. Jones.

Literature

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