

Some General Constraints on the Analysis of Knowledge and their Consequences for Warrant and for Substantive Accounts of Warrant

André Zdunek, Basel

1. General Data for the Analysis of Knowledge

An important methodological issue in the theory of knowledge is the question which kinds of items can serve as data that a proposal for the analysis of knowledge should cover. The common items are instances of knowledge or of some epistemic quality such as justification.

Yet recent discussion has become more theoretical in this methodological respect. General conditions have been defended that any adequate analysis of knowledge should fulfil. The most prominent instance is presumably the internalism/externalism distinction, internalism and externalism being highly general distinctions within accounts of justification or warrant (which latter are intended as parts of the analysis of knowledge).

The avoidance of Gettier counterexamples may also be seen as a general datum for an adequate analysis of knowledge. For Gettier counterexamples are thought to constitute a class which share a common property such as concerning false warranted beliefs that are possibly accidentally true or from which accidentally true beliefs can be inferred (cf. Gettier 1963, Merricks 1995, Howard-Snyder and Feit 2003). Since the avoidance of Gettier counterexamples is the issue the positive constraint on an adequate account of knowledge does not unambiguously follow, for there is no single constraint determined by *not* concerning false warranted beliefs that are possibly accidentally true or from which accidentally true beliefs can be inferred. This condition can be cashed out as warrant entailing truth or a warranted false belief being non-accidentally true if it were true (for details cf. Howard-Snyder and Feit 2003 and below).

In the remaining I want to introduce three general data that an adequate analysis of knowledge should cover. It turns out that these data have implications for the theoretical concept of warrant which is defined as that which (eventually redundantly) together with truth constitutes knowledge (cf. Plantinga 1993a). Finally I will investigate existing accounts of warrant whether they comply with these implications or not.

2. Non-Scepticism and the Consequence of Externalism

The first datum is *non-scepticism*. The scepticism issue is of course not decided in favour of non-scepticism. But one can pragmatically argue that the analysis of an issue has to take the existence of the analysandum for granted. In our case the analysandum is knowledge and the existence of knowledge implies the possibility of knowledge which latter amounts to the denial of scepticism, scepticism being the position that knowledge is not possible.

I now claim that by non-scepticism *externalism regarding warrant* is implied. For the internalist concept of warrant, commonly called *epistemic justification*, leads to scepticism.

Note first that the above argument does not make scepticism and an internalist conception of justification pragmatically incoherent. For the non-existence or the impossibility of knowledge does not imply the non-existence or the impossibility of justification.

The point of the sceptical implication of internalism is that an internalist conception of justification becomes indeterminate as to which belief amounts to being justified. In other words justification becomes wholly indiscriminative regarding beliefs. But it is the point of a sensible conception of justification that it allows a sufficiently conspicuous distinction between beliefs that are justified and beliefs that are not justified. For with an indiscriminative concept you will not be able to build a sensible conception of knowledge unless the concept of justification plays no substantive role in the analysis of knowledge. But then it has no function and thus no legitimate place in the analysis of knowledge. Yet internalists exactly claim that the concept of justification plays a vital role in the analysis of knowledge.

To see the indiscriminatoriness of the internalist concept of justification I remind that the core notion of the otherwise very contentious concept of the internal encompasses some causal and spatial restriction to the responsiveness of a subject's cognitive functions. Thus if you put yourself into a black soundproof box your cognitive faculties will react to almost nothing what is going on outside of your black soundproof box (below a certain threshold of course). Hence the spatial and causal constraints to the internal are rather close to the spatial surface of the subject if not underneath it. The indiscriminatoriness of the internalist concept of justification then follows by brain in the vat and analogous scenarios. Such scenarios reveal that what is internally determined may be wholly independent from what is actually the case. This is compatible with there being an actual distinction within our beliefs as to their justification, say by means of actual justificatory procedures guided by internal cognitive faculties. But the intended concept of justification should have some link with truth to be of use in the analysis of knowledge. For knowledge not only implies truth but non-accidental truth, as the Gettier problem most prominently reveals. And for justification to play a vital role in the analysis of knowledge it should contribute to the distinction between accidental and non-accidental truth. But such a contribution does the internalist concept of justification obviously not achieve as the compatibility with brain in the vat scenarios and the like shows. For they reveal that justification is compatible with any truth or falsity whatsoever.

3. The Lesson from the Gettier Problem

A second datum consists in general conditions that a solution to the Gettier problem should fulfil. Recently several epistemologists have argued that any solution to the Gettier problem is committed to an infallibilist account of warrant, that is to the position that warrant implies truth (cf. Sturgeon 1993, Zagzebski 1994, Merricks 1995, Bigelow 1999). Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder and Neil Feit

(2003) however have aptly shown that the general condition on warrant derivable from the Gettier problem is rather that either warrant implies truth or that warranted false beliefs would be non-accidentally true if they were true. Since this consequence is a disjunction whose disjuncts are incompatible nothing definite can be concluded from the Gettier problem alone.

4. Fallibilism and its Consequences

A third datum is *fallibilism*. Since at least on pragmatic reasons we endorse non-scepticism, the possibility of knowledge is taken for granted. The pragmatic rationale for non-scepticism yet entails even the existence of knowledge. On the other hand we know that many knowledge claims have turned out to be false. And we may suppose that all of our knowledge claims can turn out to be false. Yet because of non-scepticism this cannot happen at one fell swoop. This position is commonly called *fallibilism* and can sensibly be taken as a datum that any analysis of knowledge should comply with.

Now from fallibilism it can be concluded that any analysis of knowledge has to allow for a constituent concept of the concept of *warrant* that does not imply truth. It has to be the concept of warrant since truth *alone* as that which by definition (eventually redundantly) together with warrant amounts to knowledge cannot account for fallibilism because the implication of truth amounts to infallibilism, the contradictory to fallibilism. Yet the concept of knowledge without truth is by definition the concept of warrant.

Yet together with the result from the Gettier problem that warrant entails either truth or that if a warranted false belief were true it would be non-accidentally true, it follows that to cover fallibilism warrant cannot entail truth but has to have the property that if a warranted false belief were true it would be non-accidentally true.

Further with the first result from non-scepticism of externalist warrant it follows that any genuinely externalist aspect of warrant is not truth. For by fallibilism there are warranted false beliefs. Thus warrant cannot be truth. Finally this property of warrant has also to be present in warranted true beliefs, that is in knowledge.

We can summarise the results for warrant so far as follows: (i) Warrant contains an externalist aspect which is not truth. (ii) Warrant does not imply truth. It is possible that there are warranted false beliefs. (iii) If a warranted false belief were true, it would be non-accidentally true.

5. Consequences for Substantive Accounts of Warrant

What follows from this for a substantive account of warrant? It has been remarked (Merricks 1995, 841-842) that (perhaps sometimes even unbeknownst to the defender) many substantive externalist accounts of warrant imply truth such as defeater accounts (Lehrer, Pollock), tracking accounts (Nozick, Dretske, Luper-Foy) or reliabilist accounts (Goldman). These accounts are thus discredited by the results here developed.

What appears to be a most congenial account to the results obtained is proper functionalism as defended most prominently by Plantinga (1993b). The reason is that proper functionalism grounds its analysis of warrant in

properly functioning cognitive faculties. And cognitive faculties can lead to false beliefs even if they function properly and in an appropriate environment (cf. Plantinga 1993b: 17-20). This is just an empirical fact about cognitive faculties. In other words cognitive faculties are fallible. Thus proper functionalism respects fallibilist warrant.

Further proper functionalism grounds the counterfactual that if a warranted false belief were true it would be non-accidentally true. For if a warranted belief is false under proper-functionalism there is proper function of the respective cognitive faculties in an appropriate environment and the belief just happens to be false because of some accident. But if this belief were true it would be non-accidentally true. For the non-accidentality of the true belief would obviously be founded in the fact that the respective belief did arise out of the properly functioning cognitive faculties and a world in which such a true belief would arise out of these properly functioning cognitive faculties is closer than any world in which such a true belief would arise in some other way.

It has been objected (Greene and Balmert 1997, cf. Plantinga 1997) to proper functionalist accounts of warrant that their non-implication of truth is incompatible with the infallibilist result regarding warrant defended by Merricks and others such as Sturgeon (1993), Zagzebski (1994) or Bigelow (1999). The result from fallibilism obtained here shows this objection to be inconclusive.

Epistemic virtue accounts of warrant are promising as well. For epistemic virtue accounts of warrant found warrant in epistemic virtues which, at least according to the most prominent accounts (cf. Sosa 1991 and Zagzebski 1997), are also constituted by cognitive faculties as they are empirically known and to which the notion of proper function in proper functionalism refers. Internalist accounts of warrant obviously fail.

Literature

- Bigelow, J. 1999 „No Possibility of Error“, URL: <http://arts.monash.edu.au/bigelow/error.html>.
- Gettier, E. 1963 „Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?“, *Analysis* 23, 121-123.
- Greene, R. and Balmert, N.A. 1997 „Two Notions of Warrant and Plantinga's Solution to the Gettier Problem“, *Analysis* 57, 132-139.
- Howard-Snyder, D. and F., and Feit, N. 2003 „Infallibilism and Gettier's Legacy“, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66.
- Merricks, T. 1995 „Warrant Entails Truth“, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, 841-855.
- Plantinga, A. 1993a *Warrant: The Current Debate*, Oxford et. al.: Oxford University Press.
- Plantinga, A. 1993b *Warrant and Proper Function*, Oxford et. al.: Oxford University Press.
- Plantinga, A. 1997 „Warrant and Accidentally True Belief“, *Analysis* 57, 140-145.
- Sosa, E. 1991 *Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sturgeon, S. 1993 „The Gettier Problem“, *Analysis* 53, 156-164.
- Zagzebski, L. 1994 „The Inescapability of Gettier Problems“, *Philosophical Quarterly* 44, 65-73.
- Zagzebski, L. 1996 *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.