

Realizing Virtue: A Unified Virtue Epistemology

Trent Dougherty

ABSTRACT

In this paper I will offer a sketch of an account of knowledge which seeks to unify a number of disparate elements the inclusion of which I assume to be a desideratum of a theory of knowledge. The device I will utilize to achieve this unity-in-diversity is that of a functional property—a property multiply realizable in widely varying realization bases. The essential idea is that the property *warrant* is a functional property: that which epistemizes true belief, that which turns mere true belief into knowledge.¹ The ability of functional properties to be realized in diverse ways provides the flexibility to bring together all the items we want to fall under the concept *knowledge*. I will attempt to illustrate this for some key desiderata.

***Please note this is a draft shortened for APA purposes. The longer paper includes a defense of the propriety of the desiderata.

Introduction: Defending the Desiderata

The following seem to me to be some of the prime desiderata of a theory of knowledge.

1. Get *clear* cases correct. (With respect to borderline cases: to the victor goes the spoils!)
2. Have a place for the intuitive distinction between reflective knowledge and non-reflective knowledge.
3. Include both subjective aspects and objective aspects of the state of knowing.
4. Provide an illuminating account of Gettier cases.
5. Be consistent with bare-bones evidentialism.²
6. Have a role epistemic responsibility in general and for epistemic duties in particular.

The second and third desiderata constitute what I'll call the "inclusive features" of an adequate theory of knowledge. One advantage of an inclusive epistemology is that it makes sense out of what otherwise seems a curious situation: the seeming intractability of the internalism vs. externalism debate. Both sides seem to have indispensable insights into the nature of knowledge. Correlatively, neither side seems to have the theoretical resources for a decisive victory over the other. This has led

¹ This notion of warrant is suggested in Plantinga 2003a, vi.

² I have in mind here merely the truism that one's belief ought to fit the evidence. There are many ways to make this notion precise. For one prominent example see Conee and Feldman 2004, especially Chapter 4.

some to postulate multiple concepts to explain this intractability.³ The functionalist proposal purchases unity without the cost of such diversity. There is not room to defend the propriety of the desiderata themselves so results may vary.

Knowledge is creditable true belief⁴

Why do we have the concept of knowledge in the first place? It seems the answer is to distinguish a type of worthy true believer from the lucky guesser.⁵ We would not want to lump all true believers together under a single umbrella term without something to distinguish between two important kinds of true believer. The individual who correctly concludes that the 4 millionth digit in the decimal expansion of pi is '0' by reading tea leaves is importantly different from the mathematician who has spent a lifetime studying transcendental geometry and computer algorithms. The tea leaf reader was just lucky, but the mathematician deserves some credit for her research and reflection, and the effect this has had on her beliefs. We recognize this distinction by granting that the mathematician *knows* that the 4 millionth digit in the decimal expansion of pi is '0' and the tea leaf reader does not.

Since one doesn't get credit for what one obtains purely by chance, creditability entails non-accidentalitiy. For the purposes of this paper I will take "accidental" and "lucky" as synonymous and as basic, undefined notions.⁶ Note that there are various ways in which one can be lucky with respect to one's true belief and each of these can come in degrees. Thus tracking the influence of luck on the epistemic status of belief will require careful distinctions.

³ See Alston 2005 for example.

⁴ Greco 2002 traces this idea through Sosa 1988 and 1991 and Zagzebski 1996 and 1999 to Rigs 2002. See most recently Riggs *forthcoming*.

⁵ This thought is fairly pervasively expressed, but for a representative statement see Sosa 1985, 4-5.

⁶ For an attempt at defining the relevant notion of luck, see Pritchard 2005, Chapters 5 and 6. I have serious doubts about this analysis, but the notion of luck is sufficiently clear for present purposes.

Creditability is a functional property:

From the premise that warrant is a functional property—the epistemizing one—and the premise that knowledge is creditable true belief, it follows that creditability must be a functional property. That is, the property of having some property in virtue of which it is not merely an accident that my belief is true. Many physicalists use the notion of a functional property to retain physicalism in the face of multiple realizability concerns. For example, Melnyk 2003 (21) defines a functional property thusly:

A functional property, P, is a property such that, necessarily, there is an instance of P if there is a token of some type or other (e.g., an instance of some property or other) that meets condition C.

The condition C is the condition which states the functional characterization of the property. For P to be the functional property of *being a lever*, then C will state that the object exemplifying P use a rigid arm about a fulcrum to multiply force. This could be realized in wood, metal, ice or hitherto unknown substances. The suggestion that creditability is an epistemizing functional property is the suggestion that it is a property such that, necessarily, there is an instance of knowledge if there is a token of some type or other that meets the following condition: when added to true belief it yields creditability and thus knowledge. Note that functional properties can be realized in tokens of types which have otherwise nothing to do with one another.

Credit is also flexible in another way. Credit and praise are not relevantly different, they are both species of approval or positive regard, and praise can be doled out in widely varying circumstances. We praise people for doggedly resisting temptation and we also praise them for acute eyesight. It might be objected that these kinds of cases are merely analogous and that they exemplify two separate concepts. I reply that we ought not multiply concepts without necessity and that it is simpler to accept that the concept of credit is flexible enough to cover a wide variety circumstances. Plausibly, credit-worthiness is a functional property: the property of having some property or other of

which one may rightly approve. This covers the data without the need to designate a plethora of concepts.⁷

Also, knowledge is a case of *positive* epistemic status so we want an *evaluative* form of credit, not mere attribution to the agent. By seeing credit as praise or approval we can give epistemic responsibility its due.⁸

Creditability can be realized in two ways

So far I have tried to motivate the following theses: (i) The defining feature of knowledge is to give credit for true belief, (ii) credit is the epistemizing property, (iii) credit is a functional property. I now set out to show that a functionalist credit-based account of knowledge meets the second and third desiderata before taking up a consideration of the first.

That the functionalist account easily yields both reflective and unreflective knowledge is straightforward. This can be seen by considering that one can receive credit for her true belief in ways that involve reflection and those that do not. As an example of reflective knowledge, consider the logician proving a controversial theorem hosts a host of higher-order thoughts. She considers whether she believes a certain rule of inference, whether she has justification for it, whether a number of particular moves are justified, what the objections might be to a certain belief about a step in the proof. This reflection is clearly creditable. If all this reflection is a sufficient causal contributor to her getting the proof right, then she has reflective knowledge. Note that if the reflection plays an

⁷ Obviously there is a negative sense of credit as well at work when we blame someone, but since knowledge is a *positive* epistemic status I speak in the affirmative. Both modalities assume that the action in question is in some sense attributable to the agent. I take the analysis of this kind of attributability to be on the metaphysical fringes of epistemology and will not try to treat it. Some prior credit accounts of knowledge seem to take the analysis of the attributability property to be part of the theory itself (for example Greco's account). That doesn't seem right to me.

⁸ This threatens to give rise to a new form of the "Easy Knowledge" problem since someone can get credit for such a simple praiseworthy act as correctly observing the color of a desk. I take it that this problem afflicts any account of basic perceptual belief so is no special problem of mine.

insufficient causal role in her coming to have the true belief about the theorem, then her having that true belief (in the absence of other effective creditable properties) will be too lucky for her to get credit for it (though she is still to be praised for the reflectiveness itself). This shows that the current proposal meets the third desideratum as well, for it requires both that the subject exemplify some praiseworthy property and that this property be appropriately causally efficient in her having a true belief.

Contrast the above case of reflective knowledge with a simple case of recognition. The experienced bird watcher who hears the call of the pileated woodpecker and automatically thinks *That's a pileated woodpecker* also knows that this is the case. At some point she learned how to recognize this sign, but she does not think about it at all now, just as at one time we had to think about how to ride a bike and now we just do it without consciously thinking about it.⁹ Perhaps this is a hybrid case, for perhaps she gets credit for the reflective effort in learning how to recognize the call. In that case, consider an example of normal sense perception. I never put much significant effort into learning how to identify green things. Yet when the light turns green I know that it does and I proceed through the intersection.

Note the subject matter is not what is doing the work here. Some people can (or could) look at complex theorems and just see that they are true with the same ease with which I identify colors. In this case, the individual would have non-reflective knowledge of the same proposition of which I have reflective knowledge.¹⁰ To make this notion a little more precise, I'll use the notion of property entailment. One property entails another just in case it is not possible that something have the one

⁹ This is a case of knowing-how that gives rise to a case of knowing-that, but this is incidental to the example.

¹⁰ I have eschewed the terms "animal knowledge" and "human knowledge" for various reasons. I have also avoided Prichard 2005's term "sub-personal knowledge." These terms seem too loaded to me. Thanks to [name removed] for helping me see this. For Sosa's use of these terms see Sosa 1985 (reprinted in Sosa 1991) and more recently Sosa 1997. For a discussion of the propriety of dividing knowledge in two see the exchange between Williams and Sosa in Williams and Sosa 2003. For a more focused criticism see Kornblith 2004. For me the only distinction between reflective knowledge and non-reflective knowledge is how the functional property of creditability is realized, so there is only one property.

property but not the other. If the functional property *creditability* is realized by the tokening of a property (or set of properties) entailing conscious reflection, then the instance is an instance of reflective knowledge. For example if an individual tokens the property *having consciously inferred it as the best explanation of data she observed* then, since this property entails the tokening of the property *consciously reflecting* she instances reflective knowledge. If, however, the instance of the functional property *creditability* is realized by the tokening of a property not entailing conscious reflection, then it is an instance of non-reflective knowledge. For example, if an individual tokens the property *having perceived it* then, since the tokening of this property does not entail the tokening of the property *consciously reflecting* she instances non-reflective knowledge.¹¹

Responsibilism

An additional benefit of this account is that it gives us a natural distinction between responsibilist virtue and reliabilist virtue.¹² Responsibilist virtues are those virtues the exercising of which entails the property of consciously reflecting, and reliabilist virtues are those which do not, yet which have a high objective probability of leading to true beliefs. It seems to me that one cannot accrue responsibilist virtue without consciously trying to do something to bring it about that one's beliefs are true, but as long as one's credit-worthy behavior is an instance of a consciously reflective process then they ought to have shown at least some responsibilist virtue.

Gettier Cases

I have argued that the present proposal has the advantages of being what I called an “inclusive” theory: it includes reflective and non-reflective bases, and balances subjective and objective aspects

¹¹ I worry about potential counter-examples in which the property in which the creditability-realizing property entails but has no relevant connection to conscious reflection. For this reason I wish the examples to be given more force than the formulation.

¹² This distinction is a feature of the review in Axtell 1997.

of knowing. It is now time to see how it handles some standard test cases, including the Gettier cases. A very important part of my treatment relies on the fact that luck and credit come in different degrees in different varieties. Furthermore, different degrees of different varieties of luck and credit can be mixed in complex ways in the same cognitive situation. The final determination of whether one deserves credit in the final analysis will be based on an evaluation of the overall balance of luck and credit.

This last observation is the key to handling Gettier cases. In standard Gettier cases an individual has reasoned in a praiseworthy fashion to a true conclusion. Is this not creditable true belief? It is true belief by an agent whose responsibilist virtues have *something* to do with her having a true belief. The problem is that there is also a great deal of luck involved. The question is whether *on balance* the credit outweighs the luck. And notice that the luck doesn't have to swamp the whole of the credit. I said earlier that in order to balance subjective and objective aspects of knowledge the virtues of the agent must be sufficiently causally efficient in bringing it about that the agent has a true belief. So the amount of credit which must be offset by luck for the present account to give the right verdict in Gettier cases is discounted by the degree of irrelevance that virtue had to the holding of a true belief.

It is helpful to consider demon worlders in this regard. Demon worlders might reason impeccably and exemplify responsibilist epistemic virtues *in excelsis*, but the degree of effectiveness will be zero. In Gettier cases agents virtuous reasoning has *something* to do with their holding a true belief—after all they'd not have formed *any* belief had they not taken the occasion to do the reasoning—but not much: in particular, not enough to generate enough *credit-for-true-belief* to overcome the contribution of luck. In some cases this will be sufficiently clear, but as with any property composed of graded constituents there will be borderline cases.

Evidentialism

To demonstrate that the proposal is consistent with evidentialism and deontology, I will use the proposal in conjunction with evidentialist deontology to address a type of controversial case: the chicken sexer¹³ or Lehrer's Mr. Truetemp.¹⁴ Internalists have used these kinds of cases as a bludgeon against externalists for some time. Yet the externalist can always respond that little more can be said for basic perceptual beliefs by the foundationalist. It might be thought that the current proposal presents a compromise on this case: throw the externalist a bone and call this a case of non-reflective knowledge. Although it could be that this is the right thing to do in some circumstances, the status of the chicken-sexer's beliefs actually depends crucially on how the details of the story go, and in most real-life cases the story will include details which yield a negative judgement.

It is not just luck which can offset credit, criticism can do that as well. So assume that we have a duty to belief in accordance with the evidence. In ordinary cases, someone with such remarkable abilities has considerable evidence that their apparent ability is unreliable. For we generally take it that one can perceive some empirical matter to be the case only if there is some causal process linking perceiver and perceived. Yet there is no such causal story known to the naïve chicken-sexer or a Mr. Truetemp in ordinary life. On the contrary, in ordinary-life situations such powers seem to be on the same epistemic plane as the alleged ability to know at any given time what the archangel Gabriel is thinking, which, I take it, is not a good position to be in. The clairvoyant, Mr. Truetemp, the naïve chicken sexer, etc. are not fulfilling their duty to form their beliefs on the basis of evidence. Thus any credit they get for reliability is swamped by irresponsibility.

¹³ The earliest references to the chicken-sexer case I've found are Saunders 1965 and Aune 1972.

¹⁴ See Lehrer 200, 187.

Now we must remember that chicken sexing is a genuine talent. In the right circumstances it would not take long for a person with the talent to gain evidence of their reliability. They could either become enlightened to the mechanism at work or form a track record argument. The enlightened chicken sexer is in a far different position than the naïve chicken sexer and very plausibly knows, indeed reflectively knows, that this or that chicken is of a particular gender.

This treatment has a distinct advantage over the treatment of such cases by other anti-luck epistemologies. Pritchard's treatment of such cases¹⁵ in terms of a special species of luck—veritic epistemic luck—relies on a special notion of safety. Here is not the place to argue against the safety principle, but it is clear that many will regard it as an advantage of this proposal that it allows one to treat the current class of cases without having to advert to such a controversial and confounding notion as safety.¹⁶

Conclusion

I began this essay with a set of desiderata which I suggested a theory of knowledge should try to meet. I did not call them “criteria” because I think some of them are more negotiable than others and that they can be met in more or less fully satisfying degrees. The first was that it should get all clear cases right. This might be the closest thing to a strict criterion, but upon reflection the previously clear can become the not-so-clear. Nevertheless, to the extent a theory of knowledge can accommodate paradigm cases of apparent knowledge that is much to its approval. In standard cases of undefeated sensory or memory beliefs the current proposal underwrites their status as potential items of knowledge. Ordinary true perceptual beliefs arise out of virtuous sensory faculties, and if

¹⁵ Pritchard 2005, *passim* but see most recently, Pritchard *forthcoming* (in Synthese) available at <http://www.philosophy.stir.ac.uk/staff/duncan-pritchard/documents/SynthesePritchard.pdf>.

¹⁶ For a recent and trenchant general critique of safety principles see Kvanvig 2003, 133ff. For a specific response to Pritchard *forthcoming* see the response “Safety and Epistemic Luck”—Hiller and Neta *forthcoming*—in the same *forthcoming* symposium available at <http://philosophy.unc.edu/Safety%20and%20Epistemic%20Luck.pdf>.

they are not defeated by other items of information which are justified for us, then the credit which we are due for our praiseworthy faculties is not swamped by the blame of irresponsibility and we have a case of (unreflective) knowledge.

This shows that the proposal meets the second desideratum: respecting the relative positive epistemic status of reflective and non-reflective knowledge. Some of what we know we know by way of reflection and some we know without ever reflecting on it. The present account gets this right. Also covered is the third desideratum: balancing the subjective and objective aspects of knowing. I can realize creditability in my reliable faculties—this is reliabilist virtue—or I can realize creditability in my responsible reasoning and inquiry—this is responsibilist virtue. In either case if the creditability is (i) not swamped by luck, (ii) not swamped by discredit, and (iii) sufficiently causally related to my holding the true belief, then I am raised above the lucky guesser to the lofty status of knower.

That Gettier cases are cases where luck cancels knowledge is the least original part of this essay.¹⁷ I have nothing new to add to the literature other than to admit that though this case is extremely intuitive—you just happened to look at the broken clock at exactly the same time that it stopped—it would be much more secure if a solid analysis of luck could be had.¹⁸

Finally, I illustrated how the proposal could be wedded to evidentialism and deontology/responsibility to treat some controversial cases in a way that is much, much simpler than safety-based treatments. Thus, I conclude that the proposal has a considerable amount of merit and warrants further investigation.¹⁹

¹⁷ See Unger 1968, *passim*; Dancy 1985, 134; Zagzebski 1994 and 1999. This tradition of interpretation is ably chronicled in Pritchard 2005, Chapter 6, especially pp. 147-150. Here is an especially choice passage from Dancy: “[K]nowledge must somehow not depend on coincidence or luck. This was just the point of the Gettier counter-examples...”

¹⁸ Pritchard 2005, Chapters 5 and 6 is the most thorough attempt to date and to my mind quite unsatisfactory.

¹⁹ Thanks to [names removed] for valuable comments on drafts of this paper.

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