

The Folly Of Trying To Define Knowledge*

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Abstract. The paper gives an *a priori* argument for the view that knowledge is unanalysable. To establish this conclusion I argue that warrant, i.e. the property, whatever precisely it is, which makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief, entails both truth and belief and thus does not exist as a property distinct from knowledge: all and only knowledge can turn a true belief into knowledge. The paper concludes that the project of trying to find a condition distinct from knowledge that is necessary and together with truth and belief sufficient for knowledge must be doomed to failure.

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1. Warrant Entails Truth

In a series of papers on warrant Trenton Merricks has presented arguments to the effect that warrant entails truth, warrant being the property, “whatever precisely it is, which makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief.”¹ One of the main arguments underlying Merricks’s reasoning is the following:²

- (1) If a belief can be warranted and false, then it can be warranted and accidentally true.³
- (2) A belief cannot be warranted and accidentally true.

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¹ Merricks (1995, p. 841) and Merricks (1997). The notion of warrant at issue here goes back to Plantinga (1993). Note that warrant is a technical notion not to be mistaken for our intuitive concept of justification. Moreover, note that Zagzebski (1994) and Sturgeon (1993) share the view that warrant entails truth. In this paper, however, I shall focus on Merricks’s argument. Ryan (1996) and Howard-Snyder et al. (2003) dispute Merrick’s claim that warrant entails truth.

² Cp. Howard-Snyder et al. (2003, p. 319).

³ Merricks is, of course, alluding to the notion of accidental truth at play in Gettier-examples. Note that there are other notions of accidental truth, which are unrelated to the one at issue here. If I know that the coin I tossed came up heads because I saw it, there is an epistemically harmless sense in which my belief is accidentally true: it is an accident that the coin came up tails. See Pritchard (2005) and Unger (1968) for discussion of different notions of accidental truth.

(3) Therefore, a belief cannot be warranted and false.

Apart from this main argument, Merricks offers the following auxiliary argument for the motivation of premise (1):

“Suppose that it is possible that Smith has the false warranted belief that Jones owns an Escort. In other words, Smith has this false warranted belief in some possible world W . There is, of course, another possible world W^* which differs from W only in the fact that seconds before Smith formed his belief that Jones owns an Escort, Jones’s aunt died (in obscurity thousands of miles from Jones and Smith) and left him an Escort. More precisely, W^* differs from W in the way just noted, and in all that this difference entails. In W^* , is Smith’s belief that Jones owns an Escort warranted? It certainly seems so. For how could the far away and unknown death of Jones’s aunt make Smith’s (otherwise warranted) belief unwarranted? Again, how could the far away and unknown death of Jones’s aunt entail that Smith’s (otherwise warranted) belief is unwarranted? Of course, this would mean that in W^* Smith has a warranted belief that is accidentally true.”

Howard-Snyder et al. (2003) reconstruct the argument implicit in this passage as follows:⁴

- (1a) Suppose, for conditional proof, that Smith, in W , has the warranted false belief that Jones owns an Escort.
- (1b) There is another possible world, W^* , which differs from W only in the fact that Smith’s belief that Jones owns an Escort is accidentally true for Smith (and in all that this fact entails).
- (1c) So Smith, in W^* , has the accidentally true belief that Jones owns an Escort. (from 1b)
- (1d) The far away and unknown death of Jones’s aunt in W^* could not make Smith’s (otherwise warranted) belief unwarranted.
- (1e) So Smith, in W^* , has the warranted belief that Jones owns an Escort. (from 1a and 1d)
- (1f) So Smith, in W^* , has the warranted, accidentally true belief that Jones owns an Escort. (from 1c and 1e)
- (1g) So, if Smith, in W , has the warranted false belief that Jones owns an Escort, then Smith, in some other possible world W^* , has the warranted, accidentally true belief that Jones owns an Escort. (from 1a–1f)

⁴ Howard-Snyder et al. (2003, p. 320).

Premise (1) of Merricks's main argument is a universal generalization from Smith's case.

Now, the crucial premise in Merricks's argument is (1d). Why does Merricks think that the far away and unknown death of Jones's aunt in W^* couldn't make Smith's belief unwarranted? As (Ryan 1996) puts it, "what is wrong with saying that [Smith's belief] became unwarranted just by becoming accidentally true?"⁵ To get clearer about Merricks's assumption here, consider the view that warrant is the disjunctive property of either not believing p or believing p non-accidentally. More intuitively—and transforming the disjunction into a material conditional—the property at issue is thus the property of believing p only if one's belief that p is not merely accidentally true.⁶ Clearly, on such an analysis of warrant, (1d) fails and Merricks's argument collapses. However, let us ignore such disjunctive accounts of warrant for the moment and assume that warrant is a rather natural, non-disjunctive property. In other words, let us assume that warrant is an epistemic natural kind. On the basis of this assumption, the above argument by Merricks provides a strong motivation for premise (1).

How does Merricks motivate premise (2)? According to what we may call the *Gettier Intuition*, no belief that is knowledge is accidentally true. Taking this much for granted, warrant is clearly incompatible with accidentally true belief: a warranted but accidentally true belief would be a warranted true belief, and thus an accidentally true belief constituting knowledge. The negation of (2) conflicts with the *Gettier Intuition*.⁷

2. Warrant Entails Belief

In the following I shall construe an argument for the conclusion that warrant entails belief structurally paralleling the above argument by Merricks. Here is my main argument:

- (1*) If a subject can be warranted in believing p without believing p , then a subject can have a warranted but accidentally true belief p .
- (2*) No subject can have a warranted but accidentally true belief p .
- (3*) Therefore, no subject can be warranted in believing p without believing p .

⁵ Ryan (1996, p. 189).

⁶ Unger (1968) offers such an anti-luck account of knowledge.

⁷ See Merricks (1995, p. 844), Merricks (1997, p. 628) and Gettier (1963).

I assume that (2*) can be motivated without further argument along the lines of Merricks's motivation of (2), i.e. by recourse to the *Gettier Intuition*. But what about premise (1*)? To motivate (1*), consider the following case.

Suppose that there is a possible world W in which Smith is warranted in believing that Jones owns an Escort without actually believing that Jones owns an Escort.⁸ If there is such a world, then it seems plausible that there is another possible world W^* , which differs from W only in the fact that Smith came to believe that Jones owns an Escort by reading in tea-leaves. Now, note that, in W^* , Smith's belief that Jones owns an Escort is accidentally true only: it is based on tealeaves reading, a belief-forming process with no tendency to yield true beliefs. So, W^* differs from W in that Smith has an accidentally true belief and in all that this difference entails.

In W^* , is Smith warranted in believing that Jones owns an Escort? It certainly seems so, for how could Smith's coming to believe that Jones owns an Escort by reading in tea-leaves obliterate his (otherwise impeccable) warrant for believing that Jones owns an Escort? Again, how could the fact that Smith comes to believe that Jones owns an Escort by reading in tea-leaves entail the obliteration of Smith's (otherwise impeccable) warrant for believing that Jones owns an Escort?⁹ Of course, if Smith were warranted in W^* , this would mean that in W^* Smith has a warranted belief that is accidentally true.

Notice that my auxiliary argument for (1*) takes the same form as Merricks's auxiliary argument for (1):

(1*a) Suppose, for conditional proof, that Smith, in W , is warranted in believing that Jones owns an Escort without believing that Jones owns an Escort.

(1*b) There is another possible world, W^* , which differs from W only in the fact that Smith believes that Jones owns an Escort on the basis of reading in tealeaves (and in all that this fact entails).

(1*c) So Smith, in W^* , has the accidentally true belief that Jones owns an Escort. (from 1*b)

⁸ Note that this assumption puts aside the most familiar substantive accounts of warrant from the start. Causal, reliabilist, counterfactual and safety-based accounts directly entail the thesis that warrant entails belief.

⁹ It might be objected that warrant consists partly in having a good cognitive record, which excludes forming beliefs by reading in tealeaves. However, I take it that Smith's having an overall good cognitive record is compatible with his forming a belief on the basis of reading in tealeaves just once.

- (1*d) The fact that Smith believes that Jones owns an Escort on the basis of reading in tealeaves could not obliterate Smith's (otherwise impeccable) warrant for believing that Jones owns an Escort.
- (1*e) So Smith, in W^* , is warranted in believing that Jones owns an Escort. (from 1*a and 1*d)
- (1*f) So Smith, in W^* , has the warranted, accidentally true belief that Jones owns an Escort. (from 1*c and 1*e)
- (1*g) So, if Smith, in W , is warranted in believing that Jones owns an Escort without believing that Jones owns an Escort, then Smith, in some other possible world W^* , has the warranted, accidentally true belief that Jones owns an Escort. (from 1*a–1*f)

Analogously to the argument given by Merricks, premise (1*) of my main argument is a universal generalization from the case in my auxiliary argument. What is more, the crucial premise in my argument is (1*d), corresponding to the controversial (1d) in Merricks's argument: both premises, (1d) and (1*d), are only plausible on the assumption that warrant is an epistemic natural kind rather than the disjunctive property of either not believing p or believing p non-accidentally.

3. Warrant As Knowledge

Could warrant, however, be the disjunctive property of either not believing p or believing p non-accidentally? To see why it could not, note that the disjunctive property at issue can be instantiated by an object x purely in virtue of the fact that x fails to believe p . Thus, on the disjunctive account of warrant, inanimate objects such as the Eiffel Tower or Ayers Rock are warranted in believing any proposition p , which is surely absurd: rocks and steel constructions are, intuitively, not the right kind of object for instantiation of the property that turns a true belief into knowledge.¹⁰ And further implausible consequences follow from the disjunctive account: suppose you know p and therefore do not believe $\neg p$. It then follows from the disjunctive account that you know p while you are at the same time warranted in believing $\neg p$. This is a rather surprising consequence, assuming that warrant has normative force, to the effect that you ought to believe what you are

¹⁰ Even if the disjunction discussed is supposed to be just one conjunct of a more complex conjunctive property, it would still seem implausible that the property that plays a crucial knowledge-making role in conjunction with other properties can be instantiated by inanimate objects.

warranted in believing. How can we make sense of the idea that one epistemically ought to believe $\neg p$ even though one knows p ? Clearly, the disjunctive account is to be rejected.

Let me sum up. If warrant, i.e. “that, whatever precisely it is, which makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief,”¹¹ is an epistemic natural kind, then it entails both truth and belief.¹² If warrant, however, entails both truth and belief, then warrant entails knowledge. And since knowledge conversely entails warrant, warrant and knowledge are equivalent. If the notions of warrant and knowledge are equivalent, however, then—considering that warrant is a proxy for whatever turns a true belief into knowledge—there is no further point in distinguishing the two. Rather, warrant, then, just is knowledge: all and only knowledge can turn a true belief into knowledge. As a consequence, warrant as a property of beliefs distinct from knowledge does not exist, and the project of analysing the concept of knowledge must be doomed to failure.

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¹¹ Merricks (1995, p. 841).

¹² One might think that we have rather strong intuitions that it is possible to be warranted in believing p without believing p . Such intuitions, however, stem from the concept of justification rather than from the technical concept of warrant, and are accordingly to be rejected.