

Ebert on Boghossian’s template and transmission failure

Alessia Marabini & Luca Moretti

Draft of March 22, 2017

ABSTRACT

Boghossian (1996) has put forward an interesting explanation of how we can acquire logical knowledge via implicit definitions that makes use of a special template. Ebert (2005) has argued that the template is unserviceable, as it doesn't transmit warrant. In this paper, we defend the template. We first suggest that Jenkins (2008)'s response to Ebert fails because it focuses on doxastic rather than propositional warrant. Then, we reject Ebert's objection by showing that it depends on an implausible and incoherent assumption.

Boghossian (1996) offers an explanation of how we can acquire a priori knowledge of logical truths and rules based on a template. Ebert (2005) contends that Boghossian's template is incomplete, and that it becomes non-transmissive of warrant once completed. We argue that Jenkins (2008)'s response to Ebert fails because it focuses on doxastic rather than propositional warrant. Then, we rebut Ebert's objection on Boghossian's behalf by showing that it rests on an implausible assumption and is internally incoherent.

Boghossian (1996) distinguishes between *metaphysical* and *epistemic* analyticity and argues that the second notion doesn't fall victim of Quine's celebrated criticism of analyticity. A sentence *S* is *epistemically* analytic just in case one's grasp of *S*'s meaning suffices for one's knowledge of or warrant for believing the proposition *S* expresses (cf. Boghossian 1996: 363). Epistemic analyticity helps us explain how there could be a priori knowledge through reasoning and without invoking any special faculty of intuition or rational insight (cf. *ibid.*).¹

Logical principles are epistemically analytic for Boghossian because one's grasp of them suffices for one's warranted belief in their truth or validity. Boghossian contends that a priori

¹ Marabini (2013) details a presentation of Boghossian's overall view.

knowledge of logical principles is made possible by *implicit definitions*. The idea of implicit definition is this: it is arbitrarily stipulated that certain sentences are to be true or certain inference rules are to be valid, and that certain components of those sentences or rules are to be interpreted in any way that renders them respectively true or valid. Accordingly, a logical constant C will mean that logical object, if any, which makes a specified set of sentences or rules involving C respectively true or valid.

To explain a priori knowledge of logic, Boghossian contends that our knowledge of the meanings of the logical constants and how their meanings are fixed by implicit definitions put us in a position to know premises from which we can infer that the sentences or the rules that determine those meanings are respectively true or valid. Precisely, we have a priori knowledge of a logical principle A embedding a logical constant C because we can use this argument to conclude that A is true or valid:

(TEMPLATE)

(1) If C is to mean what it does, then A has to be true/valid.

(2) C means what it does.

Therefore,

(3) A is true/valid.

(Cf. Boghossian 1996: 386)

Boghossian admits that (TEMPLATE) explains epistemic analyticity only if ‘knowledge of the meaning of A ’ is interpreted *loosely* to refer to knowledge of both A ’s meaning and how A ’s meaning is fixed via implicit definitions of its terms (cf. 1996: 386). Furthermore, note that the warrant T can acquire for (3) through (TEMPLATE) is *inferential*. Boghossian must assume, therefore, that T can acquire this warrant for (3) thanks to a warrant for (1) and (2) *and one for taking (TEMPLATE) to be valid*. Accordingly, Boghossian’s claim that if A is epistemically analytic for T , T ’s knowledge of A ’s meaning suffices for T ’s warrant for A should be interpreted *loosely* in a

further sense: T 's warrant for A also requires T to have warrant for believing that (TEMPLATE) is valid.

Let's go through (TEMPLATE). Boghossian assumes that any competent speaker T has privileged access to the meanings of her language's terms. Since C is a meaningful term that T grasps, T has warrant for believing that C means what it does. So T has a warrant for (2).

Call an *implicit definer of C* any logical sentence or rule A used to implicitly define C . Suppose T knows that C 's meaning is fixed by a given implicit definition and that A is an implicit definer of C . Hence, T knows that C means what it does only if A is true or valid. Thus T has a warrant for believing (1).

By modus ponens, T can warrantably infer (3) from (1) and (2). Since T has a warrant for (1) and (2), T has a warrant for (3).

Ebert (2005: 510) contends—plausibly, in our view—that (TEMPLATE) is incomplete because (3) is *metalinguistic*. (TEMPLATE) serves to show that T 's knowledge of the meaning of A gives T warrant for believing that A is true or valid. However, T could use (TEMPLATE) to acquire this warrant *without knowing the meaning of A* . Suppose that C and its implicit definer A were expressions of a language unknown to T and that a translator told T that (1) and (2) are true without translate them. T could acquire warrant for believing (3) without understanding A .

A further step is needed to take T from (3) to a first-order claim that T understands. The adjusted version of (TEMPLATE) recommended by Ebert comes with a fourth “disquotational” step. For ease of exemplification, Ebert interprets C as ‘and’ and A as the *and-introduction* rule ‘ P and $Q \Rightarrow P$ ’.

(TEMPLATE')

(1') If ‘and’ is to mean what it does, then ‘ P and $Q \Rightarrow P$ ’ has to be valid.

(2') ‘and’ means what it does.

(3') ‘ P and $Q \Rightarrow P$ ’ is valid.

(4') P and $Q \Rightarrow P$.

(Cf. 2005: 510-511)

Ebert claims that the *entailment* from (3') to (4') fails to transmit warrant. Jenkins (2008: 117) notes that it is hard to make sense of this. For, since ' \Rightarrow ' represents an *inference*, (4') expresses no *proposition*. So there is no entailment from (3') to (4'). To obviate this difficulty, let's adjust (TEMPLATE') in a way that it is about, not the validity of the rule ' P and $Q \Rightarrow P$ ', but the truth of the *statement* ' P and $Q \models P$ ' of that rule.²

(TEMPLATE*)

(1*) If 'and' is to mean what it does, then ' P and $Q \models P$ ' has to be true.

(2*) 'and' means what it does.

(3*) ' P and $Q \models P$ ' is true.

(4*) P and $Q \models P$.

(TEMPLATE*) is close to Boghossian's original framework. Furthermore, Ebert concedes that (TEMPLATE') could indifferently be re-formulated as (TEMPLATE*).³ We accordingly construe Ebert's objection as applied to (TEMPLATE*).

Ebert contends that (TEMPLATE*) is flawed because the entailment from (3*) to (4*) is non-transmissive of warrant in Wright (2002)'s sense. For Wright, a deductively valid argument from premise X to conclusion Y is non-transmissive of warrant for a subject T if T couldn't acquire a warrant for believing Y in virtue of *both* a warrant for X and knowledge that X entails Y .⁴

Ebert (2005: § IV) argues that T could warrantedly take (3*) to entail (4*) by disquoting ' P and $Q \models P$ ' only if T grasped the concepts used in the quoted sentence, which would require T to *know the meaning of that sentence*. But that sentence is (4*). Since (4*) is epistemically analytic, by Boghossian's very lights T should thus have *independent* warrant for (4*). So T 's having warrant for (3*) would be *unnecessary* for T 's having a warrant for (4*). Hence, the entailment from (3*) to

² ' P and $Q \models P$ ' is a schematic *proposition* saying that P logically entails Q .

³ He writes: 'nothing hinges on this variation since my argument concerns a *structural* difficulty with Boghossian's template' (2005: 511n 12).

⁴ Cf. Moretti and Piazza (2013: § 3.2).

(4*) would be non-transmissive for T . If Ebert were right, (TEMPLATE*) would be redundant for the purpose to acquire warrant for (4*). For T could acquire a warrant for (4*) by just appreciating that (3*) entails (4*).

Jenkins suggests that Boghossian could reply as follows: saying that (4*) is epistemically analytic for T is saying—precisely—that if T knows (4*)’s meaning, a warrant for believing (4*) is *available* to T but not necessarily *possessed* by T . To possess that warrant, T should satisfy the additional condition of *running through* (TEMPLATE*) *to infer* (4*). This would defuse Ebert’s objection because Boghossian ‘can safely deny that the warrant [for (4*)] is possessed [by T] prior to running through the argument’ (2008: 118).

We find this response unsatisfactory, for it appears to concern a wrong type of warrant. The phenomenon of non-transmissivity is typically taken to affect *propositional* warrant (cf. Moretti & Piazza 2013: § 1). Accordingly, it is natural to interpret Ebert’s argument as claiming that (TEMPLATE*) is non-transmissive of *propositional* warrant for (4*). Yet the warrant for (4*) Jenkins is speaking of has this feature: T won’t possess it until T doesn’t *come to warrantedly believe* (4*). This is *doxastic* warrant. Jenkins argues that the thesis that (TEMPLATE*) is non-transmissive of *doxastic* warrant for (4*) is false. So Ebert can respond that Jenkins’ rejoinder doesn’t engage with his argument.⁵

Ebert contends that the entailment from (3*) to (4*) is non-transmissive because if T warrantedly believed that (3*) entails (4*), T would know the meaning of ‘ P and $Q \models P$ ’. Hence, *on Boghossian’s conception of epistemic analyticity*, T would have independent warrant for (4*). Note that on Boghossian’s conception, T would get this warrant for (4*) *through reasoning*. And this reasoning is the very one licensed by (TEMPLATE*). Thus, T would have this independent warrant for (4*) only if, presumably, T knew that (TEMPLATE*) is valid. However, T ’s mere knowing the meaning of ‘ P and $Q \models P$ ’ doesn’t require T to know that (TEMPLATE*) is valid. Thus Ebert’s

⁵ Silins (2005) shows that non-transmissivity of propositional warrant doesn’t entail non-transmissivity of doxastic warrant.

objection appears ultimately to rely on the implicit assumption that T 's background knowledge B *independently* includes the warranted belief that (TEMPLATE*) is valid.

Boghossian can respond that this assumption is implausible. For even if T weren't the man in the street but an individual intellectually sophisticated, the claim that T would *not* know that (TEMPLATE*) is valid looks utterly reasonable. Precisely, what looks reasonable is this: although T wouldn't know that (TEMPLATE*) is valid, T would be *in a position to know* it. For T could easily come to know that (TEMPLATE*) is valid if T only *entertained* (TEMPLATE*) and *analyzed* the logical relations among its components. Suppose, therefore, that T doesn't know that (TEMPLATE*) is valid, though she's in a position to know it. Boghossian can claim that, in these circumstances, if T knew the meaning of ' P and $Q \models P$ ', T would at best be *in a position to have an* independent (propositional) warrant for believing (4*). For T would *possess* this warrant for (4*) only if T *knew* that (TEMPLATE*) is valid. Hence, Boghossian can rebut Ebert's objection. For T 's mere being in a position to have independent warrant for (4*) doesn't make the entailment from (3*) to (4*) non-transmissive.

Let's consider possible replies. Ebert might complain that Boghossian's conception of analyticity could enable T to get warrant for (4*) from her knowing the meaning of ' P and $Q \models P$ ' through *variants* of (TEMPLATE*). This is possible but irrelevant. For T need not have any variant of (TEMPLATE*) in B . One might claim that T can acquire a warrant for believing (4*) on a conception of a priori knowledge different from Boghossian's, or that T can acquire such a warrant for (4*) because it is strongly intuitive that T could do so. A problem with these replies is that they go *too far*. Ebert doesn't argue that Boghossian's account of analyticity is flawed because there are alternative accounts at hand, or because we sometimes need no philosophical explanation of our a priori knowledge. Ebert contends that Boghossian's account is *internally* flawed.

Ebert (2005) examines a possible response to his non-transmissivity objection similar to the one suggested above. He concedes that Boghossian could rejoin that T 's mere knowing the meaning

of ' P and $Q \models P$ ' would only put T in a position to have a warrant for believing (4*) without making T possess it. Ebert insists that such a rejoinder would either force Boghossian to revise his view extensively by introducing further principles, or—if Boghossian introduced no new principle—it would yield serious problems (cf. 2005: 517).

We think Boghossian could comfortably sit on the second horn of this dilemma. Boghossian asserts that when A is epistemically analytic for T , T 's knowledge of A 's meaning suffices for T 's warrant for A . However, we have suggested that this sufficient condition includes the implicit clause that T must also know that the reasoning used to acquire the warrant for A is valid. If this clause weren't fulfilled, T would only be *in a position to have* a warrant for A . Hence, Boghossian need not revise his conception to claim that T 's mere knowing the meaning of ' P and $Q \models P$ ' can only put T in a position to have warrant for (4*).

As said, Ebert contends that this rejoinder would nevertheless be problematic. His argument appeals to an internalist intuition according to which any adequate account of a subject T 's possession of a warrant must entail that if T has a warrant for a proposition, T can in principle *reflect* on her warrant and *claim* possession of it (cf. 2005: 517). Here is Ebert's argument:

According to the above rejoinder on behalf of Boghossian, to possess the warrant for making the Disquotational Step involves the mere availability of a warrant... for the conclusion. However, from a reflective stance *to claim to possess a warrant* for this premise also involves a *claim to have available* a warrant for the conclusion. Thus, we need to ask on what grounds can [a subject] make the *claim to have available* a warrant for the conclusion? ... [Apparently,] the only ... route to make such a claim ... is to proceed via the template, reflect on it, and agree that it is correct. This would provide a claim to have available a warrant for the conclusion. However, this ... [method] is ... insufficient in order to claim to have a warrant available for the conclusion, as it presupposes ... that the subject is in a position to go through the argument and consider whether she can claim to *possess* a warrant for the premises. Thus, no progress is made and the initial problem re-occurs. As a result, I believe that Boghossian's template is still insufficient in providing genuine warrants for holding true certain logical principles.

(2005: 517-518)

To defuse this very condensed reasoning we need not go through all its steps.⁶ The initial premise of the whole reasoning says that ‘from a reflective stance *to claim to possess a warrant* for [(TEMPLATE*)’s premises]⁷ also involves a *claim to have available* a warrant for the conclusion’. Jenkins (2007: 119) indicates that the quoted statement looks dubious because the claim that *T* has available a warrant for (TEMPLATE*)’s conclusion isn’t part of the *content* of the claim that *T* possesses a warrant for (TEMPLATE*)’s premises. Furthermore, remember that we have assumed that *T* does *not* know that (TEMPLATE*) is valid—this is why, *T* doesn’t *possess* (propositional) warrant for (4*). But if *T* is not reflectively aware that (TEMPLATE*) is valid, it is very implausible that *from a reflective stance* *T*’s claiming to possess a warrant for (TEMPLATE*)’s premises somehow involves *T*’s claiming to have available a warrant for (TEMPLATE*)’s conclusion. Since a key premise of Ebert’s argument is unsubstantiated, the argument is inconclusive.

Let’s consider a last possible response to the rejoinder to Ebert’s non-transmissivity objection that we have suggested on Boghossian’s behalf. Ebert might concede that *T*’s background *B* won’t *typically* include the belief that (TEMPLATE*) or a variant of it is valid, while insisting that his non-transmissivity objection would go through whenever *B* included this belief. We want to show that Boghossian could reject even this (weak) response, for the rejoinder we are going to recommend unveils a second, lethal flaw in Ebert’s non-transmissivity objection.

Ebert claims that the entailment from (3*) to (4*) is non-transmissive because *T*’s knowing the meaning of ‘*P* and *Q* \models *P*’ would grant *T* independent warrant for (4*) on Boghossian’s conception of analyticity. This could happen only if *T* also knew that (TEMPLATE*) is valid—i.e., that (1*) and (2*) entail (3*) *and* (3*) entails (4*). Suppose, therefore, that *T* actually knows this. How would *T* acquire an independent warrant for (4*)? *T*’s knowing the meaning of ‘*P* and *Q* \models *P*’

⁶ For a reconstruction see Jenkins (2007: 119).

⁷ Ebert uses the singular ‘premise’ because he has particularly (2*) in mind, but he must mean both (1*) and (2*) (cf. Jenkins 2007: 119).

would give T a warrant for (1*) and (2*). Since T would know that (1*) and (2*) entail (3*), T would get warrant for (3*) via transmission across this entailment. Given this warrant for (3*), since T would also know that (3*) entails (4*), T would have a warrant for (4*) *via transmission across this second entailment*. Ebert's objection that the entailment from (3*) to (4*) is non-transmissive appears thus to rest—incoherently—on assuming that the very same entailment *is transmissive*.

Ebert might complain that we presuppose that T would get a warrant for (4*) from her understanding ' P and $Q \models P$ ' by using (TEMPLATE*), whereas T could use a *variant* of it. However, if T used a variant, that variant should embed a disquotational step to elude the metalinguistic problem. So it would still include the entailment from (3*) to (4*). In conclusion, even if it were granted that T 's background knowledge includes the belief that (TEMPLATE*) or a variant of it is valid, Boghossian could still reject Ebert's non-transmissivity objection as ultimately incoherent.

References

- Boghossian, P. (1996). 'Analyticity Reconsidered'. *Nous* 30: 360-391.
- Ebert, P. (2005). 'Transmission of Warrant-Failure and the Notion of Epistemic Analyticity'. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83: 505-521.
- Jenkins, C. S. (2008). 'Boghossian and Epistemic Analyticity'. *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 8: 113-127.
- Marabini, A. (2013). *La concezione epistemica dell'analiticità*. Roma: Aracne.
- Moretti, L. and T. Piazza. (2013). 'Transmission of justification and warrant'. In E. N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
 <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/transmission-justification-warrant/>>.
- Silins, N. (2005). 'Transmission failure failure'. *Philosophical Studies* 126: 71–102.

Wright, C. (2002). 'Anti-Sceptics Simple and Subtle: Moore and McDowell'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65: 330-348.