Warrant and Proper Function

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Abstract

In this book and in its companion volumes, Warrant: The Current Debate and Warranted Christian Belief, I examine the nature of epistemic warrant, that quantity enough of which distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief. In Warrant: The Current Debate, the first volume in this series, I considered some of the main contemporary views of warrant. In this book, the second in the series, I present my own account of warrant, arguing that the best way to construe warrant is in terms of proper function. In my view, a belief has warrant for a person if it is produced by her cognitive faculties functioning properly in a congenial epistemic environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true or verisimilitudinous belief. In the first two chapters of this volume, I fill out, develop, qualify, and defend this view, exploring along the way some of the convoluted contours of the notion of proper function. In the next seven chapters, I consider how the proposed account works in the main areas of our cognitive design plan: memory, introspection, knowledge of other minds, testimony, perception, a priori belief, induction, and probability. Then, in Ch. 10, I consider broader, structural questions of coherentism and foundationalism. My account of warrant meets the conditions for being a naturalistic account; but in Chs. 11 and 12, I claim that naturalism in epistemology flourishes best in the context of supernaturalism in metaphysics. For, as I argue in Ch. 11, there appears to be no successful naturalistic account of the notion of proper function. In Ch. 12, I argue, further, that metaphysical naturalism when combined with contemporary evolutionary accounts of the origin and provenance of human life is an irrational stance; it provides for itself an ultimately undefeated defeater.

Warrant: a First Approximation

In Warrant: The Current Debate, I canvassed contemporary accounts of warrant (that quantity enough of which is what distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief), and found them inadequate. In this chapter, I begin to develop my own account of warrant. After introducing the notions of proper function, a cognitive environment, and a design plan, I arrive at the following first approximation of warrant: a belief B has warrant for an agent S if and only if the relevant segments of S's cognitive design plan (the segments involved in the production of B) are functioning properly in a cognitive environment, sufficiently similar to that for which they were designed, and the modules of the design plan governing the production of B are (1) aimed at truth, and (2) such that there is a high objective probability that a belief formed in accordance with those modules (in that sort of cognitive environment) is true. (I add, moreover, that in these conditions the degree of firmness with which S holds B is proportional to the degree of warrant B has for S).

Warrant: Objections and Refinements
In order to achieve a deeper understanding of warrant (and in reply to some objections), I turn in this chapter to a closer look at the idea of a design plan. I do so under the following six section headings: the max plan versus the design plan, unintended by-products, functional multiplicity, the distinction between purpose and design, trade-offs and compromises, and defeaters and overrides. In connection to the notion of trade-offs and compromises in our cognitive design plan, I take up the subject of Gettier problems, trying to understand what really underlies Gettier situations and then seeing how these situations look from the vantage point of my conception of warrant. While Gettier problems do not in fact plague my account of warrant (as I try to point out), considering them nonetheless enables us to deepen our analysis of warrant. I close the chapter with a brief argument for the conclusion that my account of warrant qualifies as an example of naturalized epistemology (or naturalistic epistemology).

**Exploring the Design Plan: Myself and My Past**

In the first two chapters of *Warrant and Proper Function*, I presented my account of warrant; in the next seven chapters, I provide an explanation of how my account works in the main areas of our cognitive life. In this chapter, I begin this explanation by examining how warrant works with respect to self-knowledge (or introspection) and memory. In the course of examining self-knowledge and its relationship to warrant, I first argue against Derek Parfit's claim that we do not know and cannot justifiably believe that there is such a thing as a persisting subject of experience that is distinct from any of those experiences of which it is the subject. Second, I briefly argue that the beliefs that we are neither our brains nor our bodies (nor something like computer programs) are beliefs that have a good deal of warrant for us. Turning next to memory, I (first) provide a brief discussion of the phenomenology of memory and (second) argue that typical memory beliefs are basic (i.e., not accepted on the evidential basis of other beliefs) and are capable of having a great deal of warrant for us.

**Other Persons and Testimony**

In this chapter, I continue my explanation of how my account of warrant works in the main areas of our cognitive life, here examining how warrant works with respect to beliefs about other persons (or other minds) and beliefs furnished by testimony. As regards the first topic, I am concerned with the question of how our beliefs ascribing mental states to others acquire warrant. I examine three possible answers to this question, namely, (1) that such beliefs acquire warrant by means of analogical arguments, (2) that they do so by way of being (or being like) scientific hypotheses, or (3) that they do so by means of Wittgensteinian criteria. I argue that none of these answers is correct, and then suggest an answer that is both closer to the truth and more in line with the general theory of warrant I propose. Turning next to testimony, I explore some of its salient characteristics, argue that testimonial evidence is a basic sort of evidence for us (the warrant furnished by testimony is not and could not be furnished by induction, analogy, or abduction) and, finally, show how my account deals with Gettier problems (or semi-Gettier problems) involving testimony.
Perception

In this chapter, I point out a few salient features of my account of warrant as it applies to perception and perceptual warrant. On my account, a perceptual judgment of mine (or yours) constitutes knowledge if and only if (roughly speaking) that judgment is true, sufficiently strong, and produced by cognitive faculties that are successfully aimed at truth and functioning properly in an epistemic environment that is right for human perceptual powers. After a brief discussion of perceptual experience, I argue that ordinary perceptual beliefs are basic: they are not formed on the evidential basis of other beliefs I hold (e.g., beliefs about my experience). While perceptual judgments are not formed on the basis of beliefs about my experience, they are, nonetheless, formed on the basis of experience, and so I take a quick look at that claim. In the final section of the chapter, I briefly take up questions about learning to perceive, and entertain the position that many perceptual judgments are only partially basic: not formed solely on the evidential basis of other beliefs, but formed partly on the basis of present perception and partly on the basis of beliefs about what things (say, trees, or automobiles, or whatever it is that one is perceiving) look like.

A Priori Knowledge

In this chapter, I examine a priori knowledge from the perspective of my account of warrant. According to the epistemological tradition, what is known a priori is known, somehow, prior to or independently of experience; in the first section of this chapter, I attempt to clarify this claim and describe some of the general features of a priori belief and knowledge. In the second section I argue, among other things, that a priori warrant (more precisely, intuitive warrant) is fallible and comes in degrees. I go on to consider an objection to the existence of a priori knowledge based on what has been called the causal requirement (roughly, the claim that any objects of which we have knowledge must be such that we stand in an appropriate causal relation with them). I argue that there is no plausible form of the causal requirement that constitutes a good objection to the existence of a priori knowledge; along the way, I offer an argument for the conclusion that propositions cannot be concrete objects of any sort, and point out that it is quite possible to think of abstract objects as capable of standing in causal relations with us.

Induction

Broadly taken, the term “induction” denotes our whole nondeductive procedure of acquiring, maintaining, and discarding beliefs about what is so far unobserved or undetected or unknown. In this chapter, I examine induction from the perspective of my account of warrant. I first take up what is now referred to as “the old riddle of induction,” rejecting David Hume's claim that inductive reasoning is not rationally justified and defending the view that beliefs formed on the basis of inductive reasoning can have warrant. I then turn to Nelson Goodman's ruminations on grue and the “new riddle of induction,” which is the question: what makes a property projectible? I reject Goodman's own solution to this problem, examine other inadequate solutions, and then suggest that an answer can be found by making reference to the proper function of the human
intellect; projectible properties are just those properties that a properly functioning adult human being in our circumstances will in fact project.

**Epistemic Probability: Some Current Views**

In circumstances where one proposition A (or group of propositions G) is propositional evidence for another proposition B, my believing A (or G) can confer warrant (for me) upon B. I use the term “epistemic probability” to refer to the relationship between a pair of propositions A and B when A is propositional evidence for B; more precisely, in those cases, I shall say that the epistemic conditional probability of B on A is high. In this chapter and the next, I concern myself with an analysis of epistemic conditional probability. The first thing to see, in trying to get a general grasp of this topic, is to note the divide between epistemic probability and objective probability. In this chapter, I distinguish the former from the latter and point out some debilitating problems with the three main accounts of the former (Bayesianism, the logical theory of probability, and the account of Henry Kyburg); in the next chapter, I propose what I hope is a better substitute.

**Epistemic Conditional Probability: The Sober Truth**

In Ch. 8, I distinguished epistemic probability from objective probability and then pointed out some debilitating problems with the three main accounts of epistemic probability. In this chapter, I propose my own account of epistemic probability. I first distinguish between two sides to epistemic probability, which I call the objective component and the normative component. In typical cases where we assert that some proposition is epistemically probable, two things get asserted: that the proposition is objectively probable with respect to the evidence (the objective component), and that it is rational (or reasonable) to place a high degree of confidence in the proposition, given the circumstances of having as evidence what in fact we do have as evidence (the normative component). Attempting to unpack these two components (especially the second), I sketch the view that (roughly) the normative component of the epistemic conditional probability of A on B is the interval containing the degrees of belief a rational person could have in A, provided she believed B and was aware that she believed B, considered the evidential bearing of B on A, had no other source of warrant for B or its denial, and had no defeater for the warrant, if any, accruing to A or its denial by virtue of being thus believed on the basis of B.

**Coherence, Foundations, and Evidence**

In this chapter, I (1) examine the contrast between foundationalism and coherentism, and (2) consider evidentialism, a special variety of foundationalism. After arguing that the central tenet of coherentism is that the sole source of warrant is coherence, I argue that coherentism is mistaken and endorse foundationalism. I then offer some brief comments on the inadequacy of classical foundationalism and contrast classical foundationalism to the sort of foundationalism I
endorse, which I call Reidian foundationalism. I next turn to an examination of evidentialism, specifically the evidentialism of William Alston, Richard Feldman and Earl Conee (which version of evidentialism I refer to as the AFC view). Taking “evidence” in a sufficiently broad sense, I concur with the AFC view in its claim that whenever some belief B has warrant for an agent S, it is the case that S has evidence for B; I also argue, however, that having evidence is not sufficient for warrant – proper function is also required (and here I part company with the AFC view).

**Naturalism Versus Proper Function?**

The account of warrant I propose, utilizing the notion of proper function as it does, is an example of naturalistic epistemology: it invokes no kind of normativity not to be found in the natural sciences; in this chapter and the next, I argue that naturalism in epistemology can flourish only in the context of supernaturalism in metaphysics. To do so, I argue that there is no satisfactory naturalistic explanation or account of the notion of proper function (or related notions like purpose, malfunction, design plan, etc.). I consider proposals for such an account that can be drawn from the work of John Pollock, Ruth Millikan, and John Bigelow and Robert Pargetter, but find in each case that the proposed account is inadequate. I then consider the possibility that the notion of proper function (and related notions) should be thought of as useful fictions. After some critical comments about this possibility, I proceed to point out that if one (1) is convinced that there really is such a thing as warrant and that there really is (for natural organisms) such a thing as proper function, and also (2) thinks that there is no naturalistic analysis of these notions, then one has a powerful argument against naturalism.

**Is Naturalism Irrational?**

In this chapter, I continue to argue that naturalistic epistemology flourishes best in the garden of supernaturalistic metaphysics. I do so by presenting two epistemological arguments against metaphysical naturalism; the first argument is for the falsehood of naturalism, the second, and more developed, is for the conclusion that it is irrational to accept naturalism. Crucial to both arguments is the estimation of the value of a certain conditional probability, \( P(R/(N&E&C)) \), where (roughly) R is the proposition that our cognitive faculties are reliable, N is metaphysical naturalism, E is the proposition that our cognitive faculties arose by way of the mechanisms of evolution (i.e., the mechanisms to which contemporary evolutionary thought directs our attention), and C is a complex proposition stating what cognitive faculties we have and what sorts of beliefs they produce. In the second argument I contend that (1) it is quite plausible to think either that the rational attitude to take towards the conditional probability mentioned above is the judgment that it is low or that the rational attitude is agnosticism with respect to it, and, (2) in either case, the devotee of N & E has a defeater for any belief he holds, including N. Further, since this defeater is an ultimately undefeated defeater (as I argue), it is irrational to accept N, since it is irrational to accept any proposition such that one knows one has an ultimately undefeated defeater for it.