

*The Structure of
Empirical Knowledge*

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Harvard University Press

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, AND LONDON, ENGLAND

1985
258p. : 22cm
\$6.00

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

BonJour, Laurence, 1943—

The structure of empirical knowledge.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Knowledge, Theory of. 2. Empiricism.

I. Title.

BD161.B59 1985 121 - 85-5518

ISBN 0-674-84380-0 (alk. paper) (cloth)

ISBN 0-674-84381-1 (paper)

2025977

I must never presume to *opine*, without *knowing at least something* by means of which the judgment, in itself merely problematic, secures connection with truth, a connection which, although ~~not~~ complete, is yet more than arbitrary fiction. Moreover, the law of such a connection must be certain. For if, in respect of this law also, I have nothing but opinion, it is all merely a play of the imagination, without the least relation to truth.

—Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*

Preface

In this book I offer a systematic investigation of one central epistemological problem, perhaps the most central of all. The problem in question concerns the overall justificatory structure of empirical knowledge. If what justifies an empirical belief in the sense of providing a reason for thinking that it is true is inference from some epistemically prior empirical belief which must itself be justified before it can serve as a justificatory premise, and if what justifies this second belief is yet a further empirical belief requiring justification in the same way, and so on, then empirical knowledge is threatened with an infinite and seemingly vicious regress of justifying beliefs. Since the justification of each belief in the sequence depends on that of the prior beliefs in the sequence, it becomes difficult to see how justification ever gets started, and the threatened outcome is the skeptical conclusion that there is no empirical knowledge, indeed that no one ultimately has any reason for thinking that any empirical belief is true.

The standard solution to this problem historically has been *foundationalism*: in first approximation, the view that certain empirical beliefs are justified in a way which somehow does not depend on inference from further empirical beliefs, thus bringing the regress to a halt. The problem, of course, has always been to understand how such a sleight of hand is possible, how the foundational beliefs are themselves supposed to be justified once inference from any further empirical belief is precluded. In Part I, I offer a detailed analysis and critique of the main varieties of

Preface

empirical foundationalism, which purports to show in a reasonably conclusive way that no account of the supposed foundational beliefs is finally tenable, and thus that foundationalism, despite its historical hegemony, is fundamentally a dead end.

From a dialectical standpoint the obvious and perhaps only non-skeptical alternative to foundationalism is *coherentism*: the view that the regress of empirical justification, rather than proceeding infinitely, moves in a closed curve of some sort and that justification which takes this form is at least sometimes rationally cogent, rather than being vitiated by circularity (as it might well seem to be). But whereas foundationalism is an extremely specific and well-developed (albeit ramified) position, it is very doubtful, despite the casual impression to the contrary given by much recent epistemological literature, that coherentism is a definite position at all—as opposed to a dialectical pigeonhole which a position might occupy. There is admittedly a rather fuzzy historical tradition, perhaps best crystallized in Blanshard (1939); and a small number of recent books and articles, perhaps most notably Rescher (1973a) and Lehrer (1975), can be viewed as developing broadly coherentist positions. But it is far from obvious what these various views have in common or, a more crucial point, how they can respond to certain obvious and extremely serious problems which any coherentist position must face, especially that of why a coherentist justification, even if not viciously circular, should be seen as providing reasons for thinking that the beliefs thus justified are *true*. The aim of Part II of this book is thus primarily to explore the main elements and basic shape of a coherentist position which purports to offer a nonskeptical account of empirical knowledge, and only secondarily to defend the still fairly tentative position which results. In particular, while it seems reasonably clear that a coherentist position must take the general form indicated below, there has been too little discussion of such views to make it possible to be very confident that there are not other coherentist alternatives yet to be discovered.

In preparing the present work, I have made use of previously published material, as follows: Part I occasionally includes brief passages from "Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978):1-13; and Part II similarly incorporates brief passages from "The Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 30 (1976):281-312 (copyright 1976 by D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht, Holland). A preliminary version of Chapter 4 was published as "Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5 (1980): 53-73, and the present version is substantially based on that article. Finally, section B.4 of Ap-

pendix B is largely a condensation of "Rescher's Epistemological System," in E. Sosa, ed., *The Philosophy of Nicholas Rescher* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1979; © 1979 by D. Reidel Publishing Company). I thank all of the publishers and editors in question for permission to make use of this material.

This book has taken a long time to complete, and my thinking on the issues in question has occupied a substantially longer period still. I thus have the combined duty and pleasure of thanking those whose comments, criticisms, suggestions, and general encouragement have helped significantly along the way: Richard Rorty, Gilbert Harman, Alexander Nehamas, Carolyn Magid, Bernie Gendron, David Benfield, Jean Blumenfeld, David Blumenfeld, Marty Perlmutter, Hardy Jones, Ernest Sosa, Robert Audi, Marc Cohen, Charles Marks, graduate students too numerous to list at Stony Brook, Texas, and Washington, and, most of all, Tony Anderson. Parts of the book were presented to Robert Audi's National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar at the University of Nebraska in 1983; I am grateful to all of the participants in the useful discussion which resulted, and especially to Carol Caraway for making available to me her accurate and copious notes on what was said. I also benefited very much from the extensive comments and suggestions concerning the final manuscript which were offered by two anonymous reviewers for Harvard University Press. In addition, I am very grateful to Marsha Quinn, for help in reading the proofs; and to Jennifer Higgins and Shelley Crocker, for constructing the index.

There remain three debts of a rather different sort to acknowledge, two philosophical and one personal. First, I have come over the years to realize how deeply and profoundly my conception of what philosophy is all about was shaped by my undergraduate teacher at Macalester College, Thomas E. Hill, Sr.; I only hope that he will find the results worthwhile. Second, as will be obvious to many readers, my conception of the main issues under discussion here was strongly influenced by the difficult but philosophically nourishing writings of Wilfrid Sellars; though it has never been my good fortune to have Sellars as a teacher in the ordinary sense, I have nonetheless learned more from him than from anyone else. Finally, I owe far more than I am able to express here to my wife, Barbara: in addition to helping with the typing and proofreading, she managed to remain (mostly) cheerful in the face of the occasional moods of frustration and depression occasioned by my grapplings with the issues of this book, and was an unending source of encouragement and sustenance. It is to her that the book is dedicated.

Contents

Preface xi

PART ONE

A Critique of Empirical Foundationalism

1. Knowledge and Justification 3
 - The traditional conception of knowledge* 3
 - The concept of epistemic justification* 5
 - The epistemological task* 8
2. Foundationalism: The Main Conception 16
 - The epistemic regress problem* 17
 - The varieties of foundationalism* 26
 - A basic problem for foundationalism* 30
3. Externalist Versions of Foundationalism 34
 - The basic idea of externalism* 34
 - Some counter-examples to Armstrong's view* 37
 - A basic objection to externalism* 41
 - Some externalist rejoinders* 46
 - Arguments in favor of externalism* 52

4. The Doctrine of the Empirically Given 58
 - The idea of the given* 58
 - Schlick on the foundation of knowledge* 61
 - Quinton's conception of empirical intuition* 65
 - Lewis on the given* 72
 - An appeal to the a priori* 79

PART TWO

Toward a Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge

5. The Elements of Coherentism 87
 - The very idea of a coherence theory* 87
 - Linear versus nonlinear justification* 89
 - The concept of coherence* 93
 - The Doxastic Presumption* 101
 - The standard objections* 106
6. Coherence and Observation 111
 - An initial objection* 112
 - A suggestion from Sellars* 114
 - Coherentist observation: an example* 117
 - The justification of the premises* 124
 - Introspection* 132
7. Answers to Objections 139
 - Answers to standard objections (I) and (II)* 139
 - Some further objections* 146
 - A restatement of the coherentist account* 153
8. Coherence and Truth 157
 - The problem: justification and truth* 157
 - Realism and the correspondence theory of truth* 159
 - The metajustificatory argument* 169
 - Skeptical hypotheses* 179
- APPENDIX A. A Priori Justification 191
 - The concept of the a priori* 191
 - Is there a priori knowledge?* 194
 - Is there synthetic a priori knowledge?* 197
 - The idea of a priori intuition* 207

APPENDIX B. A Survey of Coherence Theories 212

The positivists 212

Idealism: Blanshard 214

Lehrer's subjectivistic coherence theory 217

Rescher's pragmatic coherence theory 222

Notes 230

Bibliography 251

Index 255

PART ONE

*A Critique of
Empirical Foundationalism*

PART ONE

A Critique of Empirical Foundationalism

1 Knowledge and Justification

This book is an investigation of one central problem which arises in the attempt to give a philosophical account of empirical knowledge. That specific problem will be introduced in Chapter 2. But before doing so, it is necessary to delineate and clarify the quite traditional conception of knowledge which will be assumed here and consider in some detail just what a satisfactory philosophical account of knowledge, especially knowledge of the empirical variety, would have to involve.

1.1 The traditional conception of knowledge

As is notorious, the words "know" and "knowledge" have a wide variety of uses which fall under no very neat or obvious taxonomy. My primary concern here, however, like that of most of the philosophical tradition, is *propositional knowledge*: the knowledge that something is the case, that a certain proposition is true. What is it for someone to know something in this philosophically central sense? What conditions must be satisfied in order for a cognitive state to constitute a genuine instance of propositional knowledge? Despite a great deal of recent challenge and controversy, the following quite venerable answer to these questions is, I believe, at least approximately correct. For a person A to

know that P, where P is some propositions, three conditions must be satisfied:

- (1) A must believe confidently that P,
- (2) P must be true, and
- (3) A's belief that P must be adequately justified.

Though the general intent of this explication of the concept of knowledge is no doubt quite familiar, it may be useful to offer a brief elaboration of the three conditions in relation to a specific example. Suppose then that I am said to know that the tree outside my window is a Douglas fir. What must be the case, according to the explication of knowledge just given, in order for this ascription of knowledge to be correct?

First, I must *confidently believe* that the tree outside my window is a Douglas fir, must accept the proposition in question without any serious doubts or reservations. Subjective certainty is probably too strong a requirement, but the cognitive attitude in question must be considerably more than a casual opinion; I must be thoroughly convinced that the tree is a Douglas fir.

Second, it must be *true*, in fact or in reality, that the tree outside my window is a Douglas fir. By putting the matter in this way, I mean to suggest quite deliberately the classical realist account of truth as a relation of correspondence or agreement or accordance between belief and word: the propositional content of my subjective state of mind describes or specifies the world in a certain way; and for this description or specification to be true is for the world as it is in itself, independent of my cognitive or conceptualizing activity (except insofar as that activity is itself part of what I am thinking about), to fit that description or specification. Such a view of truth is largely taken for granted by most of the philosophical tradition and by common sense. Problems can be raised about it, and some of these will be considered later (in section 8.2). But, for reasons which will emerge, I regard the realist conception of truth as indispensable to the very enterprise of critical epistemology and so will simply assume for the time being that such a conception can be adequately explicated and defended.

Third, I must be *adequately justified* in believing that the tree outside my window is a Douglas fir. Part of what this means is reasonably obvious, at least in broad outline. My belief, if it is to be justified, cannot be a mere guess or hunch or arbitrary conviction. It cannot be merely a product of wishful thinking or something I read on the slip from a fortune cookie. Instead, there must be some sort of reasonably cogent reason or ground or warrant for my belief that the tree is a Douglas fir. But what

exactly such a reason must involve will require further consideration later.

There are many important philosophical issues which have been raised about this general conception of knowledge and about the specific ingredients it involves. There are the issues arising out of Gettier's problem, which has usually been taken to show either that the three standard conditions for knowledge require supplementation by a fourth or else, more radically, that the standard conception is irremediably defective.¹ One important further result of the Gettier-initiated discussion has been the realization that attributions of knowledge, and perhaps also of justification, which would be quite beyond reproach if other things were equal may be defeasible if they are not; and the nature and range of possible defeating circumstances has been the subject of vigorous discussion.² In addition, there are difficult problems concerning the concept of belief, especially pertaining to the idea that it is propositions which are the objects or contents of beliefs.³ And there are also serious difficulties which arise from the assumption made here that the degree of justification required for knowledge falls short of certainty.⁴ All of these issues will be ignored in the present discussion, however, partly because their exact bearing on the issues which will be discussed is obscure, at least to me, but mainly because there is quite enough to do without them.

There is, however, a further and rather less frequently noticed question regarding the standard conception of knowledge which leads into the very heart of the theory of knowledge and of the issues to be considered here: what sort of justification is required for knowledge? The obvious and merely verbal answer is: *epistemic* justification, that is, the sort of justification pertaining to and appropriate to knowledge. But what sort of justification is that, and how does it differ from other species of justification?

1.2 The concept of epistemic justification

The concept of epistemic justification is clearly the central concept in the whole theory of knowledge, and this book is largely devoted to exploring in detail certain of its facets and ramifications. But my immediate task is more modest and more basic: to consider how epistemic justification differs from other species of justification and to explore in a very preliminary way some of the problems raised by the concept thus arrived at.

The reason that the first issue requires discussion is that the concept of justification is plainly a generic one—roughly that of a reason or

warrant of some kind meeting some appropriate standard. There are many specific varieties of justification actually in use and in principle as many as anyone cares to construct. Thus one may justify an action by appeal to moral standards; a business decision by appeal to business standards; an interpretation of a religious text by appeal to theological standards; and so on. What is involved in each of these examples is plainly some species of justification, but the particular standards of justification which are relevant in each case are obviously very different. Moreover, the choice of standards, in the more interesting cases at least, is not at all arbitrary. Rather there is an underlying rationale involved in each sort of case by reference to which the choice of standards is made and relative to which those standards might themselves be appropriately justified or rationalized. The immediate problem is thus to distinguish epistemic justification, the species of justification appropriate or relevant to knowledge, from other actual and possible species of justification.

Now it might be thought that the solution to this problem is obvious and straightforward: epistemic justification is that species of justification which is appropriate to *beliefs* or *judgments*, rather than to actions, decisions, and so on. But this initially plausible suggestion is only partly correct. It seems correct that only beliefs, or cognitive states resembling beliefs, are even candidates for epistemic justification. It may even be the case, though this would be very hard to show, that epistemic justification is the species of justification which is somehow most appropriate to beliefs. But there are other species of justification which also can apply to beliefs, so that mere applicability to beliefs cannot be the sole distinguishing characteristic of epistemic justification.

A pair of examples may help to illustrate this point. First, suppose that I have a dear friend who has stood by me and supported me through many trials and crises, often at considerable cost to himself. Now this friend stands accused of a horrible crime, everyone else believes him to be guilty, and there is substantial evidence for this conclusion. Suppose too that I have no independent evidence concerning the matter and also that my friend knows me well enough that an insincere claim to believe in his innocence will surely be detected. If in these difficult circumstances I can bring myself to believe in his innocence, it is surely plausible to say that there is a sense in which I am justified in so believing; indeed such a belief might well be regarded as obligatory. But the justification in question is plainly not epistemic justification, but rather a kind of *moral* justification: even if my friend is in fact innocent, I obviously do not *know* on this basis that he is innocent, no matter how compelling a reason of *this sort* I may have for my belief.

A different sort of justification for believing, still nonepistemic in character, is illustrated by Pascal's famous wager and by an analogous example offered by William James. Pascal argues, roughly, that it is rational to believe that God exists because, on the one hand, if God exists, belief will be enormously rewarded and failure to believe horribly punished; and, on the other hand, if God does not exist, the consequences of either believing or not believing will be very minor by comparison. James imagines a situation in which I must leap over a chasm to escape from some danger: it is uncertain whether I can jump that far, but I know that I will make a better effort and thus have a better chance of success if I believe that I can. In such a situation, he argues, I am justified in believing that I can make the leap, even though I have no real evidence that this is so. The point here is that even if these arguments are otherwise acceptable (notoriously there are difficulties at least with Pascal's), the kind of justification which they provide for the beliefs in question is not the right kind to satisfy the requirement for knowledge—no matter how strong it is in its own way and no matter whether the beliefs in question happen in fact to be true. It is what might be called prudential or pragmatic justification, not epistemic justification.

What then is the differential which distinguishes epistemic justification, the species of justification appropriate to knowledge, from these other species of justification? The answer is to be found, I submit, by reflecting on the implicit rationale of the concept of knowledge itself. What after all is the point of such a concept, and what role is epistemic justification supposed to play in it? Why should we, as cognitive beings, care whether our beliefs are epistemically justified? Why is such justification something to be sought and valued?

Once the question is posed in this way, the following answer seems obviously correct, at least in first approximation. What makes us cognitive beings at all is our capacity for belief, and the goal of our distinctively cognitive endeavors is *truth*: we want our beliefs to correctly and accurately depict the world. If truth were somehow immediately and unproblematically accessible (as it is, on some accounts, for God) so that one could in all cases opt simply to believe the truth, then the concept of justification would be of little significance and would play no independent role in cognition. But this epistemically ideal situation is quite obviously not the one in which we find ourselves. We have no such immediate and unproblematic access to truth, and it is for this reason that justification comes into the picture. The basic role of justification is that of a *means* to truth, a more directly attainable mediating link between our subjective starting point and our objective goal. We cannot, in most cases at least, bring it about directly that our beliefs are true, but we can