Epistemic Pluralism: The Missing Link and the Ambitions of Epistemology

Nick Zangwill, 10 July 19

Abstract 100-150

I argue that in seeking an account of what knowledge depends on we should embrace a pluralist account of the link belief and fact, and we need feel no anxiety that we should be seeking a unified account.

keywords

§1. Is knowledge one or many? Let s focus on propositional knowledge. Most epistemologists agree that the knowledge that p is constituted in part by the belief that p together with the fact that p. These two factors are constituents in all or at least most cases of knowledge.

It is what comes next that is controversial. Some *link* between the fact that p and the belief that p is widely thought to be part of what makes for the knowledge that p.

Most epistemologists think that the belief that p and the fact that p, are part of what makes for the knowledge that p. But the link between them is thought to be something in addition to those ‘conditions’. It is similar with possessing justification, for those who think that is required for knowledge. There are those who do not think that. But those who think that justification is part of what makes for knowledge also think that some belief-fact link is also part of the knowledge-maker; that is one moral of Gettier cases. Being more specific about the belief-fact link generates complications and controversies, but the belief that there is some link where there is knowledge is common ground.

Let us assume then that knowledge has a complex maker, consisting at least in the conjunction of belief, fact, perhaps justification, and then, in addition, this link between belief and fact. (See ??Zangwill 2013, 2018.) Epistemologists who are interested in knowledge want to know about this knowledge-making link. Let us call it ‘the missing link’.

(The issue I raise is orthogonal to that raised in the ‘Knowledge first’ literature (Williamson 2000). I assume that knowledge has a maker and that it has a complex maker. This has nothing to do with whether or not knowledge is a ‘mental state’; mental states might be simple or complex, and they can be constituents of complex states with other non-mental-state constituents. The question is: what are the constituents of the knowledge-maker? It may be that the knowledge-first view denies that knowledge has *any* maker; but then that is as implausible as the idea that something can be good or bad without something making it so⎯that is, it is not plausible at all.)

Familiar accounts of the missing link appeal to tracking or reliability (Nozick 1981, Goldman 1986). The question I want to raise is: what sort of thing should we be aspiring to say about the missing link? In this paper, I argue, negatively, that we should question some of the epistemic goals assumed by the familiar accounts, and positively, I argue that we can be satisfied by what I call ‘epistemic pluralism’, which means being satisfied with an unstable and shifting account of what makes for knowledge. No one kind of thing is the maker of the many cases of knowledge. The same conclusion may also be plausible for other kinds of knowledge (-how, -whether, -why and so on) and well as for other epistemic notions (justification, wisdom, intelligence, and so on), but I shall not pursue those cases.

To arrive at the pluralist conclusion, I will pursue some familiar material in section I⎯the stuff of undergraduate textbooks⎯in order to get to a point, in sections II and III, where it makes sense to raise methodological questions. These I resolve in a particular direction, one that deflates the familiar material and that opens up the possibility and plausibility of epistemic pluralism.

§2. It is not controversial to say that in *many* cases, part of what makes for knowledge is that a belief *causally depends* of on the fact believed. Many familiar cases of knowledge are like this. We believe that there is a giraffe in front of us because the giraffe in its location caused us to belief that there is a giraffe in front of us by causing our experiences of the giraffe. There is more to knowledge than such a causal link; but that causal link is partly constitutive of knowledge. Saying this situates us near established intellectual terrain. The causal theory of knowledge proposed that the knowledge that p ??depends in part?? on a causal dependence of the belief that p on the fact that p, or at least a causal relation between them (Goldman 1967, and see also Armstrong 1973). Those writers put it in terms of the causal relation being a necessary condition for knowledge, but I replace that with dependence (Zangwill 2018). (Being a member of the set of cases of knowledge is a necessary condition for being knowledge that has nothing to do with what makes something knowledge.) This was supposed to be a general account of the knowledge-making belief-fact link covering *all* cases. That was quite an ambitious theory⎯overly ambitious⎯but we can at least give it credit for recognizing that *many* cases are like this.

One problem with the ambitious causal theory was that it risked being overly restrictive in its exclusion of non-casual dependencies between belief and fact, which might generate knowledge in the case of mathematical, moral, modal. logical or theological knowledge. There is a hallowed distinction within propositional knowledge between empirical and a priori propositional knowledge. We can see this distinction as characterizing the knowledge-maker⎯some knowledge-makers have features that make the knowledge empirical, whereas others have features that make it a priori. (The same goes for empirical and a priori justification.) Only in cases of empirical knowledge is the knowledge-making link a causal relation <<McGinn ref??>>. But a general causal theory of knowledge rules out the possibility of a priori knowledge a priori, just in virtue of what knowledge is! Perhaps a priori knowledge is not possible. But one does not want the account of knowledge to rule out that possibility.

A possible modification, at this dialectical point, is to say that the knowledge-making link is a *dependency* of belief on fact, which is causal dependence in empirical cases, and which is some other kind of non-causal dependency in cases of a priori knowledge. <<??(see Zangwill 2012)>> A causal link would then be a *case* of the more general dependency, which in part of what makes for knowledge in all cases. However, if we say this, we run into a complication. Requiring that the knowledge-making link is always one of dependency seems objectionable because the belief-fact link may be *indirect*. For example, in our knowledge of the future, our beliefs about the future do not depend on the future facts. Instead there is an indirect causal chain linking beliefs and facts via a common cause of them both. We know about the future despite the fact that our beliefs about the future facts do not depend on the future. It is similar with innate knowledge that might depend on indirect causal links between belief and fact.

There are also other cases that are difficult to account for in terms of belief-fact dependencies⎯knowledge of general facts and negative facts. Knowledge of general facts seems to involve metaphysical dependencies between general facts and instances as part of the route between belief and fact. And knowledge of negative facts seems to involve metaphysical dependencies between negative and positive facts as part of the route between belief and fact. So, in these two cases, the overall belief-fact route is indirect, consisting of a *conjunction* of a metaphysical dependency and causal relation. Perhaps these cases should be classified as a posteriori because *part* of the belief-fact link is a causal link. Nevertheless, metaphysical dependencies are also part of the overall story.

The general moral seems to be that the belief-fact link that knowledge depends on may not be a causal dependence of belief on fact⎯it may be a more indirect link, including causal relations and it may include metaphysical dependencies as part of the overall belief-fact link. These are all cases of knowledge without straightforward belief-fact causal dependence.

But things get even more complicated; for then there is Alvin Goldman’ fake-barn case, where we are in fake barn country but happen to be perceiving a rare case of a real barn. This is an instance of the opposite kind of case where there *is* a straightforward causal dependence of belief on fact but without knowledge (Goldman 1976). Goldman thought that such cases are not knowledge because there is no reliable discriminatory ability, despite the belief-fact causal dependence. Thus, the connection between knowledge and belief-fact causal dependence may be challenged in both directions.

Goldman’s interpretation of these cases is that in those unusual circumstances, where most apparent barns are fake-barns, the person’s process of belief-acquisition is not reliable despite the direct causal relation in the particular case. But suppose we are in what we might call a Fake Barn World’, where every case is a fake barn case. This world is like a skeptical world, with a perverse controlling demonic intelligence, except that either a particular person or people in general are always right. Or the world might be one in which people are usually but not always right, so that they do not get suspicious that things are too good to be true. There might be just one victim or many. In this world, supposing there is just one victim, a person truly believes that p when p, and just when she is confronted with the fact that p, which causes the belief that p?? except that the surrounding circumstances are always non-standard. Every time she looks at something, everything is normal about the person, those things, and the causal and perceptual pathway between those things and the person. For example, suppose the person is looking at a car and she experiences it as a car and she judges that it is a car, and the car causes her experience of it. But all the other cars are fake cars, merely cardboard cutouts that look like cars. Suppose the person then turns her attention to a different car, to one of the fake cars. The demonic perverse controlling intelligence transforms that car into a real car, which the person perceives and causally interacts with in the normal way. Meanwhile the original car is transformed into a fake car, along with all the other cars in the world. In this fake barn world, a person is very reliable or even completely reliable. The world is like a traditional demonic skeptical world except that the person is always right, they always have true beliefs. But in both worlds the person never knows anything, despite their reliable true beliefs. So reliability does not always make for knowledge.

So it goes! Or does it?

§3. The standard reaction to these scenarios is to seek a different theory that covers all cases. If there is chaos, impose order! However, another reaction is to learn to enjoy wallowing in disorder. This means embracing a *pluralist* outlook, which rejects the underlying quest for generality: we could say that although *some* cases of knowledge are knowledge in virtue of belief-fact causal dependence, others are knowledge in virtue of indirect causal links, and others are cases of knowledge in virtue of discriminatory abilities, and others in virtue of non-causal dependencies. Once the quest for generality is abandoned, all these knowledge-makers can be embraced, without having to reject any of them. To use a term familiar in the philosophy of mind, knowledge might be ‘multiply realized’ in different non-epistemic states. It could be that in an ordinary non-barn example where there is a barn in front of me, I know due to the causal dependence between my belief that there is a barn in front of me, and the presence of the barn, even though that does not at all make for knowledge in a barn example because that is not a case of knowledge. We *might* persist in seeking a unitary theory that captures all the cases. But why do that? We can also abandon that quest.

‘Multiple Realization’, as I use the term, does not imply functionalism, where that is a unitarian theory that posits a reduction of mental states to second-order causal roles. Such a theory would indeed give an explanation of multiple realization of mental states types in first-order states. But multiple-realization is compatible with the lack of functional reduction. Positions classified as ‘anomalous monism’ occupy that space, embracing multiple realization without functional reduction.

We now have a new meta-debate between *unitarians* and *pluralists* about what makes for knowledge. Is there one kind of non-disjunctive non-epistemic property that makes for knowledge in all cases, or is there just a great variety of non-disjunctive kinds of non-epistemic states that make for knowledge in different cases?

The first point to make is that the assumption of unitarianism has not been given any justification and indeed it lacks plausibility. Compare the situation in moral philosophy. One role for moral theory is to underpin and explain at least many of our common sense ‘intuitions’, although many intuitions may be revised in the light of theory. What we think makes for a moral property instantiation comes to an end. But it is very far from clear that it comes to an end in a moral *theory*⎯a theory in which moral kinds are not multiply realized in non-moral kinds, and instead there is one non-moral kind that always makes for moral property instantiations. For example, we may think that it is wrong to cut up one healthy person to save six unhealthy people and that it is wrong to have sex with animals. Need these share a wrong-maker? It is not obvious. Similarly: folk epistemology says that in some cases we know due to a causal relation and in other cases we know because we have perceptual justification. In the case in which someone knows because of a causal relation, the fact that in some *other* cases someone knows without a causal relation does not mean that in the original case the causal relation must be a case of some further kind, which is what really makes for knowledge in that case, deep down. Another example: in some cases, knowledge is partly constituted by justification; in other cases, not. Why generalize? Jonathan Dancy has pursues this kind of argument in moral philosophy (Dancy 2004). Unitarian epistemological theorizing is as questionable as the quest for unity in moral theory. (Much of Bernard Williams’ work questions that goal.) I do not take this to be a refutation of Unitarianism in moral philosophy or epistemology. Unitarian theories many have other virtues. But common sense does not support Unitarianism. Certainly, there is no presumption in favor of the sophisticated ambitions of unifying general theory, either in epistemology or in moral philosophy. Explanation might come to an end, sooner than an enthusiastic philosopher theorist might wish, in basic dependence relations that do not derive from something deeper. For example: “Because we are human animals” might be basic in moral philosophy, at least in folk moral theorizing. The idea that there *must* be some other deeper theoretical basis is one that awaits justification (See Williams 2006). Similarly, folk epistemology says that we know different things in different ways. The fact that beliefs are caused by what they are about or the fact that the person has a perceptual experience or memory experience of something or that the person possesses testimonial evidence may be basic knowledge-makers. The idea that a more general theory *must* be found, which unifies the many intuitions of folk epistemology, is itself in need of justification. The knowledge-making links may be of diverse kinds.

§4. In the previous section I highlighted the unargued assumption of unitarianism by some epistemologists. In this section, I raise two considerations that provide positive support for pluralism and give us positive reasons to reject unitarianism.

The first reason, conservatism, we have already noted. It has some force, but it is not a principled point, so I will spend much time on it. But it does seem to make difference to which side has the onus of proof. Unitarianism is revisionary of common sense, and this suggests that a favorable onus of proof lies on the side of pluralism, just as the onus of proof in ethics is against consequentialism and Kantianism in moral theory, since their theories are revisionary of moral common sense (as Williams persistently argues). Of couree, this is not decisive. Consequentialists and Kantians provide theoretical unification and explanation in such a way that it might be thought to be an intellectual virtue in a theory. Nevertheless, such virtue has to outweigh counter-intuitiveness to folk makers???. The reason that consequentialism seems revisionary is that folk epistemology exhibits considerable diversity of particular judgements, each based on a maker but with no unified (non-disjunctive) type of maker across the different cases that is invisible to ordinary epistemic thinkers. The pressure to deepen the knowledge maker, to yield one that harmonizes with other cases, amounts to a revision of the native’s folk epistemology, because folk epistemology is satisfied with particular epistemic claims. It is not that folk epistemology cannot be wrong and cannot be deepened. It can, just as folk morality can be wrong and cannot be deepened. However, we need special, and especially strong, reasons to claim that folk epistemology is defective or radically incomplete, and some unifying principle can be found. At least, no one has presented a compelling case for epistemic unitarianism. So, conservativism counts in favor of pluralism. Perhaps not decisively, but it counts all the same.

Secondly, in positive support of pluralism, the following more principled reason may be urged, which is that the *role* of knowledge favours pluralism. Whatever knowledge is, or depends on, knowledge plays a *role* in our lives. Knowledge is useful. For example, knowing the road to Larissa typically makes us a *reliable* guide for getting to Larissa on many occasions, in the sense that we are likely to have true beliefs and unlikely to have false beliefs. Knowledge makes us reliable: if one knows facts of a kind, then our beliefs of that kind will be likely to be true and unlikely to be false in ordinary circumstances---and we can put that to use. The role of knowledge is a *relation* that it stands in with respect to other things. And reliability is one role of knowledge. Reliability is not what knowledge *is*; indeed, it has its reliability role *because* of what knowledge is. One explains the other. Knowledge explains reliability, in many cases. To illustrate this, we may contrast Larissa type cases with an example that is usually thought to be a counter-example to a general reliabilist theory of knowledge: we might be reliable because we believe whatever an infallible Dali Lama says (Putnam 1981). This is an example of reliability without knowledge, and which, therefore, is supposed to make a problem for a general reliability theory of what knowledge *is*. But I take the example to be a case where something other than knowledge has the usual role of knowledge. There can also be cases of knowledge without its usual role. Perhaps knowledge of hinge propositions are like this. I know that there is an external world or that the world has existed for five minutes even though I am not reliable when that is cashed out in terms of what I would believe if that were not true. By contrast, in *many other* cases, although not all, we are reliable in virtue of knowledge. There can be reliability without knowledge and knowledge without reliability, even though, in many cases reliability is a role that knowledge plays, and it is one that is explained by knowledge. Knowledge is not identical with reliability but knowledge typically explains reliability

Knowledge explains reliability. Now add that we are, and may be, reliable in a variety of different ways: in virtue of causal dependencies, in virtue of discriminatory abilities, in virtue of possessing justification, and so on. All sorts of different things make us reliable. We might be causally related to the fact in question. We might have a perceptual experiences of the fact in question. We might ask the right people. We might be an infallible God. We might have made a Faustian contract with the devil. There are many ways to be reliable. If so, there is no plausibility in a unitarian theory of what makes for reliability. The things that make a person reliable are too diverse to build into a single embracing theory of reliability. But that in turn means that a pluralist theory of *knowledge* is also plausible, for at least the cases where knowledge explains reliability.<<??>> Given that the role of knowledge is multiply realized, it is plausible that the same is true of knowledge. <<??>> How could we combine a unitarian theory of knowledge with a pluralist theory of what makes us reliable given that knowledge explains reliability in many cases?

Here is an example with causation running the other way⎯to knowledge rather than from it. Education aims to produce knowledge, among other things. That is one of its roles. But education takes a variety of forms. Teachers sometime impart knowledge by testimony, the children passively listen and memorize by rote. But more modern methods aim to develop skills to enable the children acquire knowledge for themselves. In the latter kinds of methods, justification seems to play a role but not in the former. Or perhaps, if we think we have reasons to trust testimony, the two routes provide different kinds of justification. Or perhaps it is that in one case the knowledge derives from understanding, unlike the other. Again, children can gain knowledge by interacting with other children, or by thinking on their own. Education takes different forms in the way it produces knowledge. Therefore, by an argument parallel to the one given for the reliability role, which is a consequence of knowledge, it is plausible that what knowledge depends on is multiply realized. <<??>>

Reliability and education are not the only roles of knowledge. Knowledge does all sorts of things for us and it arises in all sorts of ways. But in such all cases, it is plausible that there are a variety of ways to do those other things and there are a variety of ways of producing knowledge. If so, it is plausible that there are a variety of ways of knowing.<<??>> There are a plurality of knowledge-makers.

The method of argument employed here compares favourably with the argument(s) for multiple realization in the philosophy of mind. One common argument asserts a tendentious reduction of a mental kind to a second-order causal role, and then with ease deduces the multiple realization of the second-order causal role in physical properties. Another argument invokes a faculty of imagination, which is supposed to tell us (somehow) about metaphysical possibilities. A better argument, by contrast, begins with an uncontroversial observation about the actual causal roles of the property in question⎯roles that need not be universal. Then, equally modest uncontroversial observations are made about the variety of ways in which that causal role can be fulfilled. Then conclusions about the irreducibility of nature <<??>> of mental states be be deduced. The argument is thus more low-key, not employing tendentious metaphysical reduction or imagined metaphysical possibilities, just familiar observations about actuality.

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I conclude that we should embrace a pluralist account of the missing link and feel no anxiety that we should be seeking a unified account. That is good news given half a century of trouble that philosophers have had achieving a satisfactory unified account.

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NZ 2013 KT

Nick Zangwill 2018: “Epistemic/Non-epistemic Dependence”, *Nous*.

Metaphilosophy

I am pleased to report that your paper “The Missing Link and the Ambitions of Epistemology,” has been accepted for publication in *Metaphilosophy*.  We intend to publish your work in our next available issue.

You’ll no doubt want to review your current draft once more and do any fine-tuning you think necessary before publication.

Our reviewer thought highly of your paper, but suggested that a more careful proofreading is needed since a number of errors were noticed.  Also, they suggested a slightly revised opening paragraph which provides a bit more context to the essay.

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===========================================================================  
Referee: 1  
Comments to the Author:  
  
Nice but highly under-developed. We need to hear \*something\* general about what knowledge is such that (it's plausible that) it's multiply realized in the suggested way. (Cf. functionalism about the mind.) Also: the paper does not discuss the role of justification at all. Perhaps justification is not necessary for knowledge, and Gettier (arguably) showed it's not sufficient. But it's very odd that it gets no mention at all.

Report A.

This is an interesting paper because it puts forward an interesting and underdiscussed idea in epistemology-- that there might be no unified account of the sort of mind-world dependency relation required for knowledge.  However, this very short paper requires significant development before it is ready for publication.  Here are some issues that I think should be addressed in a fuller discussion.

How does the proposal interact with “knowledge first” epistemology? Some comments suggest that it is at least compatible, and perhaps even entails such an approach, but again, this theme is not developed in any significant way.  Note that the answer to this question would also speak to both the originality and the significance of the proposal.

The author should expand on his/her comments regarding the functional role/ multiple realization of knowledge.  Does the author intend a strict analogy to functionalism about mental states?  Either way, this interesting idea could be better developed and defended.

Likewise, the analogy to debates in moral theory should be better developed and defended.

The author cites some reasons not to expect theoretical unity here. But aren't there reasons on the other side as well?  Likewise, aren't there reasons to prefer theoretical unity, all else equal, and doesn't this speak to the burden of proof issue?

There is other literature that could be fruitfully engaged as well.  For example, the virtue epistemology literature regarding the attribution or "because" relation, and the literature on grounding in metaphysics.

In short, there is potential here for a very interesting paper, but the current version is inadequately developed as it stands.

Report B.

Overall, I don’t recommend publication.

My substantive worries.  The author seems to assume that ordinary starting points about knowledge are causal in nature, and that folk epistemology is not unitarian.  Neither claim is plausible, as far as I can tell.  First thoughts about knowledge typically contrast it with true belief and when this happens, conversations turn immediately to the concept of evidence (or something in that neighborhood).  Causal and reliabilist elements can be present in such discussions as well, but the idea that one’s first thought about the missing link involves a causal link strikes me as not true and certainly not true to the history of epistemology.

Also, the distinction between unitarians and pluralists needs much more careful articulation.  I thought I had a somewhat reasonable understanding of the distinction until I read, “Unitarianism is revisionary of common sense.”  I have no idea why one might think that.  The search for unifying explanations in science suggests common sense is in general Unitarian, and I see no reason to think that this general fact doesn’t apply here as well.  But perhaps I don’t grasp what Unitarianism really is.  And things got worse when I read the discussion of what a Unitarian account of reliability might be:  “All sorts of different things may make a person reliable. If so, then it is clear that there is no plausibility in a unitarian theory of reliability. For the things that make a person reliable are too diverse to build into a single embracing theory of reliability. We just have the abstract characterization in terms the likelihood of true and false beliefs.”  My first thought is that if the abstract characterization is adequate, we do have a unitarian account that is defensible.  Moreover, the mere fact that lots of different things may make a person reliable doesn’t show that Unitarianism is implausible.  Compare:  lots of different things make for a good life, so it is implausible to think that there is any unified account of what a good life is.  If anything is a non sequitur, that is.  And the same applies to the inference in the text.  Unless, of course, I have not rightly discerned what Unitarianism is here, which is perhaps the case, but if it is the case, the flaw of the paper is that there is no clear idea given of the central distinction.