How Gettier Helps to Understand Justification

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Epistemic justification shares an important structure with knowledge: being success from ability. Therefore, justification also allows for Gettier cases. I will describe such a Gettier case for justification and present a diagnosis, relying on virtue epistemology. A virtue-evidentialist account of justification arises quite naturally from these considerations.

1. Introduction

I would like to argue for the thesis that knowledge and (epistemic) justification share a common structure, namely, the structure of 'success from ability', i.e., success which is explained by the exercise of ability. The structure of 'success from ability' is well-known from discussions of knowledge, as a virtue-theoretic structure (cf. Sosa 2007, Greco 2009). I will not try to defend this view here, but simply suppose that it is basically correct. My – original – claim that I will try to defend is that the very same virtue-theoretic structure attaches to justification as well. Thus, justification also allows for Gettier cases, i.e., cases in which the success is reached but is not reached from (or due to) ability. The subject reaches the relevant success luckily – in a certain sense of 'luck', of course: in the case of knowledge it is 'veritic luck' (i.e., lucky truth; cf. Pritchard 2005), whereas in the case of justification it is 'reasons luck', as we can call it (i.e., luckily being supported or backed up by some evidence).

I will describe a Gettier case for justification (section 2). Then I will present a diagnosis that is framed within virtue epistemology (section 3). And finally, I shall sketch a view of justification and evidence which is quite attractive and allows us to make sense of all the relevant phenomena discussed here (section 4).

Before I begin with describing the Gettier case for justification, however, a word on what is meant by '(epistemic) justification' is in order. I take it that the term 'justified belief' is not univocal. It can be used to denote various (similar but) different phenomena: blameless and/or responsible belief, rational belief, reasons-related belief, entitled belief, and possibly even further phenomena.[1] It is rather uninteresting to debate which one really deserves to be called 'justified belief'. What is important for epistemology is to see the differences and commonalities that are relevant for the epistemic status of a belief. Here I will focus on 'justified belief' in the sense of reasons-related belief, i.e., belief which is appropriately linked to some objective piece of evidence (reason). (I will spell out below in more detail what I mean by 'evidence' and what the 'appropriate link' involved is.) Concerning *this* phenomenon I will argue that it has a success-from-ability structure and, thus, allows for Gettier cases. The central question is: how exactly does a belief have to be related to a reason in order to count as justified? The claim about the success-from-ability structure is supposed to answer this question.

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[1] David (2005) presents a quite similar list.

2. A Gettier Case for Justification

I will now describe a Gettier case for justification. It will involve a subject – call her 'Daniela' – who is veridically hallucinating. In veridical hallucination, a subject undergoes a perceptual experience with a content that is in fact satisfied by the world. The world perceptually appears a certain way to the subject, and the world actually is that way. But the satisfaction of the experience's content is entirely a matter of sheer luck; there is no systematic dependence of the experience on the world (as there is in cases of genuine perception). We can suppose that the subject is entirely unaware of the fact that she is hallucinating. She thinks that she is perceiving (or has no thought or belief about this matter at all, if that is possible). The following case of Daniela will be such a case of unrecognized veridical hallucination.[2]

Daniela is an ordinary subject, equipped with ordinary perceptual and conceptual capacities. However, she has taken a hallucination-inducing drug, unrecognizedly. Presently she undergoes a hallucinatory experience as of a red tomato in front of her. By sheer coincidence, there is in fact such a red tomato in front of her (exactly as she is hallucinating it). The world is the way it appears to her. She is veridically hallucinating. On the basis of her experience, Daniela forms the belief that there is a red tomato in front of her. Now suppose that in Daniela's context the facts that she is veridically hallucinating (certain color and shape facts) are really evidence or reasons for believing that there is a red tomato (believing that p). (These facts reliably indicate the presence of a red tomato, in Daniela's context at least.) So there is evidence for her belief that p. We can say that her belief is 'evidenced', to coin a phrase.

Intuitively, Daniela is in possession of evidence, since she veridically represents it in her experience. She grasp the evidence, or is somehow aware of it (though the awareness need not be phenomenal consciousness). And Daniela respects her evidence, by rationally forming the belief that p on the basis of her experience. (We can safely suppose that she has no further evidence as to whether there is a red tomato in front of her or not.) Her belief that p is rational, intuitively. Yet something is missing. There is something suboptimal about her belief. Intuitively, her belief that p is not justified. This comes out quite clearly if we compare her case with the corresponding good case in which she is genuinely perceiving the same facts (*ceteris paribus*). In the good case, her belief would be justified. But actually it is not.

Let me clarify what I mean by 'evidence' and 'reasons'. Here I am not using these terms in a generic, unspecific sense. Rather I will use them in the sense of objective facts (or other kinds of entities) that speak in favor of the truth of certain beliefs. Typically, the evidence is non-psychological (even though it can be psychological in special cases). Fingerprints and traces are paradigm examples of evidence. They are reasons, epistemic reasons. So by 'reasons' I do not mean anything whatsoever which makes a belief epistemically justified or contributes to its being justified. These justificatory factors are not what should be called reasons. Rather, I am using the terms 'evidence' and 'reasons' in a specific sense which accords with a specific strand of thinking of 'evidence' and 'reasons' that is present in our ordinary thinking and reasoning. And I will use '(piece of) evidence' and 'reason' interchangeably and synonymously here. For example, a reliable process of belief formation may or may not be a reason or piece of evidence for the subject's own belief that is the output of that process. But even if it is evidence, unless the subject is somehow aware of this fact (that her belief is the output of that reliable process) she is not in possession of this evidence.[3]

A variation of Daniela's case would be a corresponding case in which things are the same except for the fact that there is no tomato in front of her but a wax object that perceptually duplicates the genuine object. Then Daniela's belief would be false. – This shows that the

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[2] For veridical hallucination see Lewis (1980).

[3] For more on reasons and evidence, see Hofmann (2013).

issue is independent of the truth of the resulting belief and, thus, that the truth of the resulting belief is not relevant. But we can focus on the simpler case, as described above, where the belief that p is true.

Now consider the following first reaction, or objection, to the case. One might think that Daniela's belief is not simply not justified, but is less justified than the same belief in the good case, or is justified but *not fully* justified. – This first objection, however, is not really convincing. The phenomenon is not a matter of degree but of quality. Daniela is entirely luckily in possession of evidence, as luckily as could be. And in the corresponding good case she would be entirely systematically and reliably in possession of evidence (since genuinely perceiving). So Daniela's case (i.e., the bad case of veridical hallucination) is not just a case of less than full justification. There is simply no justification. The difference is just like the difference between being flat and being bumpy. Ultimately, it may be a matter of degree – just as vastly many thing are ultimately a matter of degree. But the concept of justification that we are working with is such that it allows us to make the flat-out, 'absolute' claim that her belief is not justified. It would be inappropriate to describe her belief as justified but not fully justified. (If one wished to introduce a dimension of degree in one's conception of justification, one could do so, presumably by linking the degree of justification to the strength of the evidence that the subject possesses. But the strength of the evidence is not the issue in the case of Daniela's belief. One could make it as strong as possible if one wanted to.)

3. A Virtue-theoretic Diagnosis

We can draw the following two lessons from the case. (1.) Possession of evidence comes in two varieties, lucky and non-lucky possession of evidence. (2.) Justification requires non-lucky possession of evidence. The reason why Daniela's belief lacks justification is that her possession of the evidence is lucky.

It remains to clarify what kind of *luck* we are dealing with here. It is of course a certain kind of epistemic luck. This kind of epistemic luck is not to be confused with evidential luck. Evidential luck is familiar from discussions of luck in connection with knowledge. One may come luckily into possession of some piece of evidence, for example, by simply turning one's head for the fun of it and, thus, coming to see something (which is a piece of evidence). This kind of luck does not undermine knowledge.[4] But this kind of luck, evidential luck, is not what we are dealing with here in our discussion of justification. Seeing something (perceiving something) is not at all a lucky way of coming into possession of evidence in the sense which is relevant for justification. Quite the contrary, it is usually a highly reliable and systematic, non-lucky way of possessing evidence. It may be a matter of luck that one engages in perceiving at all. But the perceiving is not a lucky connection to the world (the perceived entities and facts). So the kind of epistemic luck that undermines justification is not to be confused with the sort of evidential luck just described. What matters for justification is whether the correct representation of the piece of evidence is formed in a reliable, competent way or not. One may accidentally believe something which is a reason for a certain other belief (for example, by lucky guessing), and one may then form this other belief on the basis of the former one. Then one is actually in possession of the evidence, and one exploits one's evidence in the appropriate, rational way. But this will not be sufficient for achieving justification. Possessing evidence by a lucky guess is not good enough for arriving at a justified belief.

Once we recognize that possession of evidence comes in these two forms, the lucky and the non-lucky form, a further step of theorizing seems almost obvious. A *'virtue-evidentialist account of justification'* suggests itself. According to such an account, one's justification

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[4] See, for example, Pritchard (2005), ch. 5.

depends on competent possession of evidence. More precisely, the following basic claim about justification seems natural and very attractive:

> (VE) A subject's belief that p is *prima facie* justified iff the subject is non-luckily in possession of evidence for the belief that p and bases her belief that p on this evidence.

This embodies our two lessons. And of course, VE is structurally similar to the virtue-theoretic accounts of knowledge known from the works of virtue epistemologists like Ernest Sosa and John Greco.[5] One reaches a certain success in a reliable, competent way. In the case of knowledge, the success is the belief's being true. In the case of justification, it is the belief's being evidenced. Exercise of the competence explains the success feature. If one competently reaches an evidenced belief, the fact that there is some piece of evidence in its favor (i.e., the fact that the belief is evidenced) is not a mere coincidence or accident. The exercise of the relevant competence is what explains the success. Perception is a paradigmatic way of competent possession of evidence. What we see and hear is our salient evidence, in many contexts. We exercize perceptual abilities and thereby come to possess evidence. The evidence consists in the perceived entities and facts. They are evidence for beliefs about natural and artificial kinds, since they speak in favor of the truth of corresponding beliefs about these kinds, at least in normal or typical conditions.[6]

Considering a further objection can be helpful in order to avoid some misunderstandings. The objection is this one: Daniela behaves epistemically rational and well in forming her belief that there is a tomato in front of her. So her belief is justified – contrary to what has been claimed above. After all, Daniela treats her 'information' as evidence, and it is really evidence for what she comes to believe.

This objection has to be rejected. It rests on a confusion of (epistemic) rationality and (epistemic) justification. As already mentioned at the beginning, we are not working with a generic, unspecific concept of justification here. Rather we are concerned with the specific concept of justification that links a belief in some interesting, appropriate way to objective evidence. It has already been granted that Daniela proceeds rationally. But the rationality in question consists essentially in a way of responding to her perceptual experience (the perceptual hallucination). This is what she gets right and, therefore, there is something about her belief that is epistemically good. But in conformance with a quite general picture of rationality, rationality is a certain, good way of responding to 'information'.[7] Rationality does not cover the condition that needs to be satisfied by this 'information' – the right relation to the world. Even a brain in a vat could behave entirely rationally, by forming the (essentially)

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[5] Here I rely on the so-called 'reliabilist' branch of virtue epistemology (for knowledge), not on the so-called 'responsibilist' branch (paradimatically proposed by Linda Zagzebski).

[6] One should point out that what the exercise of the ability explains is not just the formation of the belief but its having the relevant success feature. We are opting for '*strong* virtue epistemology', as Pritchard calls it. See Pritchard (forthcoming). Strong virtue epistemology is favored by Sosa (2007) and Greco (2010) in their accounts of knowledge. Here I sketch a strong virtue-theoretic account of justification. Strong virtue epistemology has the important advantage of providing an explanation of the surplus value of the achieved epistemic status. Reaching success from ability is more valuable than reaching it accidentally, *ceteris paribus*. For a discussion of some of the questions concerning the explanation of the surplus value of knowledge, see Hofmann (forthcoming). A strong virtue-theoretic account of justification promises an explanation of the surplus value of justified belief, as compared to unjustified belief. Quite strikingly, this kind of surplus value has not been discussed much in the recent literature. It is mentioned by some, for example, in David (2005), but the usual focus is on knowledge and its surplus value. The 'new Meno problem' (as one might call it), concerning justification, is largely unexplored.

[7] Numerous authors could be cited as favoring such a conception of rationality, for example, Parfit (1997).

same beliefs as we do in response to his or her perceptual experiences.[8] But the connection to the objective evidence would be missing. And this connection is essential for the concept of justification that we are dealing with here, i.e., the concept of reasons-related justification.

In other words, justification requires an appropriate relation to the evidence, whereas the function of rationality is 'merely' to make use of the evidence that one possesses in the form of suitable mental states (and it can be exercized even if one is not in possession of evidence at all). The intuition that there is something (epistemically) good about Daniela's belief can thus be fully captured by ascribing rationality (and possession of evidence). But it should not be described as concerning justification. Distinguishing justification from rationality is quite crucial for getting at the epistemologically important structures. The objection misdescribes the (correct) underlying intuition.

4. More on a Virtue-theoretic Account of Justification

We are heading toward a virtue-theoretic account of justification. VE lies at the heart of it. Let us now note some important features of the structure that underwrites justification. (All of the following is tentative and sketchy, of course.)

First of all, justification requires the possession of evidence, in the form of suitable mental states (such as genuine perceptions, for example).

Second, on the question of what possession of evidence consists in we can occupy an intermediate position between a Williamsonian conception on the one hand, and an internalist conception on the other hand. For a Williamsonian, possession of evidence consists in knowledge: 'E = K'.[9] But arguably, this is too high a requirement. One can possess evidence by simply *perceiving* the relevant facts, even in the absence of corresponding beliefs.[10] But this does not necessarily lead into an internalist conception of evidence possession, such as, for example, Richard Feldman's.[11] One need not think that possessing evidence is entirely determined by the subject's mental states. In fact, the virtue-theoretic account is robustly externalist, since objective evidence is required. A brain in a vat (having an inaccurate perceptual experience as of p) does not possess p as a piece of evidence if p is not the case. But still, one need not believe (and know) the evidence in order to possess it; perceiving it is good enough. (Knowing it is, of course, also good enough.) Thus an intermediate position is available which seems to have all of the advantages of the 'objective' Williamsonian, knowledge account without requiring the implausibly high standard of knowledge.

Third, justification exhibits the same structure of 'success from ability' as knowledge. (Again, the 'from' here is to be understood in a certain, strong sense – according to 'strong' virtue epistemology.) A belief is successful because of the exercise of the relevant competences. Arguably, these competences can be understood as (complex) dispositions.[12] What makes a disposition a competence (or 'epistemic virtue') is its reliability.[13] Having evidence in its favor

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[8] Of course, the brain in a vat could not form the very same *de-re* beliefs as we can, since the objects are missing.

[9] See Williamson (2000).

[10] Non-epistemic perception (i.e., perception without corresponding belief) is of course what is crucial here. The issue is not whether the content of perceptual states is (always) conceptual. What matters is the absence of belief. For some discussion of non-epistemic perception and Williamson's equation 'E=K' see Hofmann (ms).

[11] See Feldman (2005), for example.

[12] This is how Sosa and Greco understand competences, and I agree. See Sosa (2010) and Greco (2010), 77.

[13] For some arguments about how this is to be understood see Hofmann (forthcoming).

takes the place of being true, the success feature in the case of knowledge. The structure is the same.[14]

Forth, the virtue-theoretic account can be extended in a quite natural way such as to take defeaters into account. (This is a major advantage over pure reliabilism.) Possession of counter-evidence makes for defeaters.

Fifth, the view counts as a form of *reliabilism*. Reliability lies at the heart of epistemic competences and 'virtues', as understood here. Truth conduciveness is guaranteed by the favoring relation: the evidence speaks in favor of the belief in question and thereby makes the belief likely to be true (in an objective sense of likelihood).

A lot more would have to be said in order to arrive at a full theory of justification. But it seems that we have an attractive beginning that deserves to be taken seriously. Intuitions about cases are one thing, and they are typically not universally agreed upon. But the theoretical perspective of a structure of 'success from virtue' is a further thing that seems to be so promising that one can hardly resist engaging with it.

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[14] The structure of success-from-ability extends beyond doxastic matters and epistemology, and can be found in the agential realm. Sosa (2007) has emphasized the presence of this structure in artistic performances and the sports. For an account of acting for a reason in terms of 'apt action' see Mantel (2012).

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