Warrant is unique

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Abstract   Warrant is what fills the gap between mere true belief and knowledge. But a problem arises. Is there just *one* condition that satisfies this description? Suppose there isn't: can anything interesting be said about warrant after all? Call this the uniqueness problem. In this paper, I solve the problem. I examine one plausible argument that there is no one condition filling the gap between mere true belief and knowledge. I then motivate and formulate revisions of the standard analysis of warrant. Given these revisions, I argue that there is, after all, exactly one warrant condition.

1 Background

Distinguish two ways of characterizing a condition C. The first (*functional analysis*) tries to state the role C plays in the relevant (epistemic, moral, etc.) economy. Functional analyses pick out a condition (or conditions) by description; one can imagine a functional analyst saying, 'let C name that condition (or those conditions) that satisfy the following description...'. A second way of characterizing a condition C (*substantive analysis*) tries to state what C actually *is* (or at least, when it holds). A substantive analysis is an attempt to formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions of C's being realized. Put differently, while

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functional analyses say what role *C* plays, substantive analyses say what it is that plays that role.[1]

Alvin Plantinga stipulates that warrant is that quality or quantity, enough of which makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief.[2] This is his functional analysis of warrant. I shall use 'warrant' in the sequel only with reference to what Plantinga calls *knowledge-level warrant*—that quantity of warrant (or any higher, I suppose) that fills the gap between true belief and knowledge.

Such a functional analysis of warrant is supposed to be non-partisan.[3] That is, it is supposed to be compatible with a wide range of substantive analyses of warrant. In conceiving of warrant as a condition fulfilling a particular epistemic role, we have not committed ourselves to much in particular about what warrant actually *is*, whether *undefeated justification*, *reliable belief formation*, or whatnot. And with something like Plantinga's functional analysis of warrant in hand, epistemologists have in recent years attempted to say something interesting about warrant. Their project is to discover warrant's logical properties while saying little or nothing by way of substantive analysis: an intriguing prospect.[4]

In particular, epistemologists have wondered whether warrant entails truth. Is it possible for a belief to satisfy a warrant condition and be *false*? Infallibilists like Trenton Merricks say 'no.' Fallibilists like Sharon Ryan, Frances Howard-Snyder, Daniel Howard-Snyder, and Neil Feit say 'yes.' And we have in the journal debates between these characters an interesting exchange.[5]

2 The uniqueness problem

But this exchange (like many) has its Johnny Raincloud: Michael Huemer. For Huemer thinks that there no one condition answering to the functional analysis Plantinga has given. This is the uniqueness problem. And it is a problem, for if there is not just one condition that turns true belief into knowledge, then it is not clear that we can say anything interesting about warrant after all. Not without supplying a substantive analysis of warrant, that is (but this is a task many shy away from–and with good reason, I think).

Huemer's makes trouble for Merricks, et al. as follows: first, he offers this gloss on Plantinga's functional analysis of warrant:

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[1] This distinction when applied to 'warrant' tracks with Balmert and Green's distinction between 'k-warrant' (functional) and 'p-warrant' (substantive). See Balmert and Green (1997), p. 132.

[2] Plantinga (1993), p. 3.

[3] This is, I take it, why Plantinga says that warrant is 'that *whatever precisely it is*, which makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief.' Ibid.: 3–4, emphasis added. Merricks, too, clearly thinks of this as a feature of Plantinga's functional analysis of warrant. See Merricks (1995), pp. 841–842.

[4] I have in mind Coffman (2008), Howard-Snyder, Howard-Snyder, and Feit (2003), Kearns (2007), Merricks (1995), Merricks (1997), and Ryan (1996).

[5] I think the exchange is productive and philosophically interesting, at least. More importantly, I think there is nothing inappropriate about it. There are no insidious assumptions lurking in the background. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate this conclusively. More on that later.

GLOSS: Warrant is the relation W such that: necessarily, S knows that p if and only if (S believes that p, p is true, and $W(p, S)$). When $W(p, S)$ holds, we say that 'p is warranted for S.'

If we understand Plantinga's functional analysis of warrant in this way, there are some rather startling implications. First, the condition S *knows that* p counts as warrant. To see this, note that necessarily, the condition S *knows that* p is realized just in the case that S *believes that* p *and* p *is true and* S *knows that* p.[6] So it follows on GLOSS that S *knows that* p is warrant. Or at least, it's among the class of conditions picked out by GLOSS.

Further, for any condition that satisfies GLOSS, there will be another, non-equivalent condition that also satisfies GLOSS:

> The defining condition for warrant–that it yield knowledge when conjoined with true belief– is satisfied by multiple different properties. How can this be? Because 'knowledge' is ambiguous? No–the non-uniqueness of warrant follows from a general principle of logic, even if 'knowledge' is univocal. The important point is that it is perfectly possible that $(p \wedge q) = (p \wedge r)$ even though $q \neq r$ (where the equals sign represents logical equivalence)... Indeed, something stronger can be said for any propositions p and q, there exists at least one proposition, r, such that $(p \wedge q) = (p \wedge r)$ but $q \neq r$. (To see this, just let $r = (p \rightarrow q)$.)... Thus, if there is a relation W_1, such that $Kp = Bp \wedge Tp \wedge W_1 p$, then there ... must exist another, non-equivalent relation, W_2, such that $Kp = Bp \wedge Tp \wedge W_2 p$.
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> If there is a relation, W_1, such that $Kp = Bp \wedge Tp \wedge W_1 p$, then there can, and indeed must exist another, non-equivalent relation, W_2, such that $Kp = Bp \wedge Tp \wedge W_2 p$. Which of these relations is warrant? We may either conclude that there is no such thing as warrant, because 'warrant' has not been adequately defined; or allow that both W_1 and W_2 are warrant relations–that is, both are relations that can play the warrant role in a definition of knowledge. I prefer the latter option.[7]

Thus the uniqueness problem. It is a problem for the fallibilism/infallibilism debate because it says that there is no one condition participants in the debate are arguing over. Their debate centers around the logical properties of that condition (warrant) which answers to a description. But if Huemer is right, there is no one such condition.

This is bad enough, but it is not the only trouble Huemer makes for Merricks and Co. For Huemer has a related argument purporting to show that both infallibilists and fallibilists are mistaken; there are some conditions answering the description of GLOSS that entail truth, and some that do not.[8]

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[6] On the assumption that S *knows that* p entails both p and S *believes that* p, at least.

[7] Read 'Bp' as 'S believes that p,' while 'Kp' reads 'S knows that p', and 'Tp' reads 'p is true.' Huemer (2005), pp. 172–173.

[8] See Ibid. pp. 172–175.

If there is a warrant condition that entails truth, then there is another one that does not. Suppose there is a relation W_1 that satisfies GLOSS and that entails truth. That is, suppose W_1 is such that: necessarily, if $W_1(p, S)$, then p. Now take the following condition (call it W_{1*}) : *being such that p is true only if $W_1(p, S)$*. It is clear that W_{1*} satisfies GLOSS. This follows from our assumption that W_1 satisfies GLOSS. So S knows that p if and only if p is true, S believes that p, and $W_1(p, S)$.

But W_{1*} does not entail truth. Something can be such that (p is true only if $W_1(p, S)$), even given that p is false. In fact, in worlds where p is false, *everything* is such that that (p is true only if $W_1(p, S)$)!

And if there is a warrant condition that does not entail truth, then there is another one that does. Suppose there is a relation W_2 that satisfies GLOSS and that does not entail truth. That is, suppose W_2 is such that: possibly, $W_1(p, S)$ and not-p. Now take the following condition (call it W_{2*}) : *being such that p is true and $W_2(p, S)$*. Note that W_{2*} satisfies GLOSS (given our assumption that W_2 does). And W_{2*} entails truth. If something is 'such that (p is true and $W_2(p, S)$)', then p is true.

I have catalogued four odd consequences of GLOSS that Huemer exploits. To recapitulate: Assume GLOSS. Then first, knowledge itself is a warrant condition. Second, there is more than one warrant condition. Third, If there is a warrant condition that entails truth, then there is another one that does not. Fourth, if there is a warrant condition that does not entail truth, then there is another one that does.

The upshot is that saying anything interesting about warrant without doing some substantive analysis does not seem to be very promising. So much the worse for the fallibilism/infallibilism debate.

3 Knowledge-making

There is another way of interpreting Plantinga, et al.'s functional analysis of warrant. We may analyze warrant as a condition that (when realized) both *entails* that some items of true belief are items of knowledge and that *makes* those items knowledge, a condition *in virtue of which* some true beliefs are known:

> KNOWLEDGEMAKER: Warrant is the relation W such that: necessarily, S knows that p if and only if (S believes that p, p is true, and $W(p, S)$) and such that: if S knows that p, then the fact that $W(p, S)$ makes S's belief that p an instance of knowledge.

This analysis of warrant can answer some of Huemer's arguments. Unlike GLOSS, it does not misclassify knowledge as warrant. For the fact that *S knows that p and p is true* does not plausibly make S's belief that p an instance of knowledge. It is rather some epistemic good (e.g., justifiably believing that p, coming to believe that p in a reliable way, etc.) enjoyed by S that makes her true belief that p an item of knowledge. Knowledge does not itself make. Similarly (and again, unlike GLOSS), KNOWLEDGEMAKER does not obviously entail that there is more than one warrant condition, or that some warrant conditions entail truth while others do not.

Can we rebut Huemer's complaints about the fallibilism/infallibilism debate so easily? I do not think so. First, it is not clear what 'making' amounts to. It seems that

p makes it the case that *q* just in the case that *q* is true in virtue of *p*.[9] But what is the 'in virtue of' relation? Is there just one such relation? If not, which one is here at play? I do not know the answers to these questions. Luckily, we do not need such answers. For an analysis of warrant can be given in other terms, terms that are not obscure (I do this below). Second, KNOWLEDGEMAKER is of only limited use in resolving the uniqueness problem. For while we can employ KNOWLEDGEMAKER to rebut Huemer's arguments against the uniqueness of warrant, it does not *guarantee* that there is exactly one warrant condition. We can do better; we can look for an analysis of warrant that guarantees uniqueness. And we can find it. As it turns out, such an analysis has independent motivation too.[10]

4 Analysis and uniqueness

We have seen how Huemer makes trouble for those who wish to argue about warrant while remaining neutral about what it turns out to be. Before answering Huemer's arguments directly, it will be instructive to consider their relation to the broader project of philosophical analysis. A brief excursion from our central topic will help reveal where Huemer's arguments falter.

A substantive analysis is, among other things, an attempt to state the necessary and sufficient conditions of a concept's application. There are constraints on successful analysis, and these constraints go beyond a bare truth requirement. An analysis may be true but unsuccessful. Consider the:

> CAUSAL ANALYSIS OF CAUSATION:*c causes e* just in the case that *2+2=4 and c causes e*

As neat and true an analysis as any (the analysans and the analysandum are logically equivalent, more than can be said for many purported analyses!)—but hardly a successful bit of philosophy.

Clearly something is wrong with CAUSAL ANALYSIS OF CAUSATION. Here is my take on what this is. Substantive analysis is a project that among other things is supposed to 'break down' a concept into its constituents. And when so broken down, none of the (proper) constituents of an analysis are supposed to be logically equivalent to the analysandum. If they were, then no 'breaking down' would have gone on, after all. It is the constituents of the analysans taken all together that are supposed to be logically equivalent to the analysandum, not when taken one at a time. We can put the more more carefully as a necessary condition on the success of any analysis:

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[9] As Oliver notes: 'We know we are in the realm of murky metaphysics by the presence of the weasel words 'in virtue of'.' (1996), p. 48. Surely if we can avoid such murkiness, we ought to. And we can.

[10] Plantinga presupposes that exactly one condition makes the difference between mere true belief and knowledge. The functional analysis of warrant I propose below guarantees such uniqueness. If fitting well with Plantinga's remarks is a desideratum on functional analyses of warrant, this is one more reason to prefer mine over KNOWLEDGEMAKER. For a critical treatment of Plantinga's various remarks on warrant's role, see Pust (2000).

SUCCESS: An analysis A is successful only if: for every proper constituent C of A's analysans, C is logically weaker than A's analysandum (where a condition C is logically weaker than a condition D just in the case that D entails C but C does not entail D).[11]

SUCCESS gets the right answers. It can tell us what is wrong with CAUSAL ANALYSIS OF CAUSATION. The problem: CAUSAL ANALYSIS OF CAUSATION has a proper constituent of its analysans, c causes e, which is logically equivalent to its analysandum. So, c causes e isn't a logically weaker condition than c causes e. No 'breaking down' has occurred, for one of the items we're left with is the same (in the relevant logical sense) as the item we began with.

5 Uniqueness resolved

Recall that Huemer's argument for there being a uniqueness problem assumed a particular reading of Plantinga's functional analysis of warrant, GLOSS. Now see that GLOSS suggests an unsuccessful substantive analysis of knowledge, viz.:

BADKNOWLEDGE: S knows that p just in the case that p is true, S believes that p, and S knows that p.

Given SUCCESS, BADKNOWLEDGE is just as it seems—a bad analysis of knowledge. GLOSS, too, is bad, for it gave rise to BADKNOWLEDGE in the first place. GLOSS, I suggest, is an implausible and uncharitable reading of Merricks, Plantinga, et al. and their employment of a functional analysis of warrant. A more plausible reading of Plantinga's functional analysis of warrant would look instead like:

GLOSS 2: Warrant is the logically weakest relation W such that: necessarily, S knows that p if and only if (S believes that p, p is true, and $W(p, S)$).[12]

On GLOSS 2, two problems Huemer suggests are resolved. First, 'S knows that p' won't turn out to be a warrant condition on GLOSS 2. For 'S knows that p is not a logically weakest relation picked out by GLOSS 2. So far, so good. Second (and for the same reason), neither is *being such that p is true and $W_2(p, S)$* a warrant condition on GLOSS 2. Even better.

But consider Huemer's other case: *being such that p is true only if $W_1(p, S)$*. This is a condition that satisfies GLOSS 2, but there is still something unsatisfying about it. For recall that something can be such that (p is true only if $W_1(p, S)$), even given

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[11] SUCCESS will do for our present purposes, but it may be in need of minor debugging. Note that on SUCCESS, an analysis like 'x is God if and only if x is essentially omnipotent and x is essentially omniscient and x is essentially omnipresent' would be an unsuccessful analysis if only God could be omniscient. I shall leave untouched the important question of what sense we can make of 'constituent talk' when it comes to analyses.

[12] R is the logically weakest relation with feature P just in the case that there is no relation R_* (where R_* has feature P) such that R entails R_* and R_* does not entail R. Note that this reading of 'logically weakest' ensures only that W is *among* the logically weakest relations with a certain feature; the addendum by itself does not solve the uniqueness problem since W could be one of many relations with the relevant features, all of which are equally logically weak.

that p is false; in worlds where p is false, *everything* is such that that (p is true only if $W_1(p, S)$).

In offering a functional analysis of warrant and inquiring into its features, Merricks, Plantinga, et al. are ostensibly doing epistemology. They are inquiring into the nature of *some epistemic good*. And surely *being such that p is true only if $W_1(p, S)$* is no epistemic good. First, it is had by decidedly non-epistemic beings at worlds where p is false. Second, it is hard to see how p's being false could be an epistemic good at all. If this were the case, then I (and everyone else) would have an epistemic good for every false proposition. Worse, false beliefs based in indiscriminate and crazy guesses would bring with them some positive epistemic status. Implausible, to say the least. The final revision we must make to our functional analysis of warrant is obvious, then:

> GLOSS 3: Warrant is the logically weakest epistemic good W such that: necessarily, S knows that p if and only if (S believes that p, p is true, and $W(p, S)$).

The fix is a good one. First, it is motivated (see § 4). Second, it excludes the cases Huemer proposes. Since *being such that p is true only if $W_1(p, S)$* is not an epistemic good, it will not get picked out by GLOSS 3. I have answered Huemer's arguments for there being a uniqueness problem. But a reader might wonder: can we really be sure that there is just one condition picked out by GLOSS 3? Is there just one warrant condition after all?

I shall now argue in the affirmative. In doing this, I shall lay to rest the uniqueness problem in whatever other form it may take. I help myself to three assumptions in my argument for the uniqueness thesis:

(A) A disjunctive condition of (unqualified) epistemic goods is itself an epistemic good.
(B) A disjunctive condition (a condition of the form *being such that C or D or ...* where C and D are themselves distinct and non-equivalent conditions) is logically weaker than its disjuncts (C, D ...).[13]
(C) There is at least *one* condition satisfying the description in GLOSS 3.

My argument shall assume for *reductio* that there are distinct and non-equivalent conditions answering to the functional analysis provided in GLOSS 3.[14] From this supposition and the assumptions above, we derive the uniqueness thesis as follows:

1. There are distinct and non-equivalent conditions $W_1...W_n$, all of which satisfy GLOSS 3 (assumed for *reductio*.)
2. Let D be the disjunction of $W_1...W_n$ (*being such that W_1 or W_2 or...W_n*).
3. D satisfies GLOSS 3:

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[13] This principle holds only given the 'distinct and non-equivalent' fillip: *p or p* is not logically weaker than *p*.

[14] *Distinct but equivalent* conditions pose no trouble to my argument, since all such conditions would have the same relevant logical features.

(a) S knows that p just in the case that S believes that p, p is true, and D is realized (from 1, 2).

(b) D is an epistemic good (from 2, A).

(c) D is logically weaker than $W_1 ... W_n$ (from 2, B).

4.   So there is at most one condition answering to Gloss 3 (from 3).

5.   So there is exactly one condition answering to Gloss 3 (from 4, C). Q.E.D.

I have resolved the uniqueness problem. And I have done so decisively, I think, for any argument implying that there is more than one warrant condition (as analyzed by Gloss 3, at least) implies a contradiction. So much the worst for such arguments, I say.

I have now accomplished the central goal of this paper: to resolve the warrant uniqueness problem. And while I here offer no resolution for the debate over warrant infallibilism, I have at least vindicated its cogency. One assumption made by fallibilists and infallibilists alike (that there is just one warrant condition) is a good one. At least, it is true.

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