One

Intellectual Trust in Oneself

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The Importance of Intellectual Self-Trust

1. CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONALISM AND INTELLECTUAL TRUST

To what extent should we intellectually trust ourselves? Questions of trust arise about our opinions, and they also arise about the faculties, practices, and methods that generate these opinions. Moreover, there is a relation between the two. If I have trust in the reliability of my faculties, practices, and methods, I will tend also to have trust in the overall accuracy of my opinions, and vice-versa. Trust in one tends to transfer to the other.

Questions of intellectual trust also arise about other people's opinions and faculties, and they can even arise about one's own past or future opinions and faculties. Moreover, there is a relation between these questions and question of self-trust, for whenever one's current opinions conflict with those of others, or with one's own past or future opinions, there is an issue of whom to trust: one's current self, or the other person, or one's past or future self? However, one of the central claims of this work is that there is also an interesting theoretical relation between the two sets of questions. I argue in Part Two that the trust it is reasonable to have in one's current opinions provides the materials for an adequate account of the trust one should have in the opinions of others and in one's own past and future opinions. But in Part One, my focus is more limited. I am concerned with intellectual trust in one's current self.

Most of us do intellectually trust ourselves by and large. Any remotely normal life requires such trust. An adequate philosophical account of intellectual trust will go beyond this observation, however, and say

something about what necessitates intellectual trust, how extensive it should be, and what might undermine it.

I approach these issues from an epistemological point of view, which is to say I am concerned with the degree of self-trust it is appropriate for individuals to have insofar as their goal is to have accurate and comprehensive opinions. Opinions and the faculties that generate them can also be evaluated in terms of how well they promote other intellectual goals. They can be assessed, for example, on their informativeness, explanatory power, simplicity, testability, theoretical fruitfulness, and countless other intellectual dimensions. In addition, they can be assessed with respect to whether they further one's practical goals. The assessments that traditionally have been of the most interest to epistemologists, however, are those that are concerned with what I call 'the epistemic goal', that of now having accurate and comprehensive beliefs.

I am especially interested in investigating issues of intellectual self-trust from an internal, first-person perspective. My primary concern is not to look at inquirers from the outside and ask whether their opinions have the characteristics required for knowledge. Instead, I examine how issues involving self-trust look from the perspective of someone who wants to be invulnerable to self-criticism insofar as his or her goal is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs. In previous work, I argued that there are various senses of rational belief, but that one especially important sense is to be understood in terms of making oneself invulnerable to intellectual self-criticism.[1] In what follows, I defend, extend, and occasionally revise this position. However, the account of intellectual self-trust I defend is independent of this account of rational belief; the former does not presuppose the latter. For convenience, I often use the language of epistemic rationality to report my conclusions, but my principal interest, to repeat, is in how issues involving self-trust look from the perspective of someone who wants to be invulnerable to self-criticism insofar as his or her goal is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs.

Issues of self-trust are important in epistemology, I argue, because there is no way of providing non–question-begging assurances of the reliability of one's faculties and beliefs. Of course, much of modern epistemology has been devoted to the search for just such assurances. Descartes's project is perhaps the most notorious example, but there are

1 See especially Richard Foley, *Working Without a Net* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

numerous, more recent examples as well. For the first half of the twentieth century, most of the philosophical community thought that classical foundationalism was capable of providing assurances of the overall reliability of our beliefs. A roster of the great philosophical figures of this period is also a roster of the great proponents of classical foundationalism: Russell, (the early) Wittgenstein, Ayer, Carnap, and C. I. Lewis. These philosophers had their disputes with one another, but they gave remarkably similar answers to the core questions of epistemology: some beliefs are basic and as such their truth is assured; other beliefs are justified by virtue of being deductively entailed or inductively supported by these basic beliefs; we can determine with careful enough introspection whether our beliefs are justified, and if they are, we can be assured that they are also for the most part true; and we are justified in relying upon the opinions of others only to the extent that we have good inductive evidence of their reliability.

These positions came under withering attacks in the last half of the twentieth century, with the result that classical foundationalism is now widely rejected.[2] As classical foundationalism has waned, a variety of movements and trends have taken its place. Indeed, the most salient feature of contemporary epistemology is its diversity. The demise of classical foundationalism has brought with it a bewildering but also intoxicating array of new views, approaches, and questions. There have been fresh attempts to refute skepticism; coherentism, probabilism, reliabilism, and modest foundationalism have staked their claims to be the successors of classical foundationalism; and naturalized epistemologies and socialized epistemologies have proposed novel approaches to epistemological questions.

Epistemology is a field in transition, and one potential benefit of the move away from classical foundationalism is that it should be easier to appreciate the importance of self-trust. Classical foundationalism masked the issue with a trio of powerful but ultimately unacceptable proclamations: there are basic beliefs that are immune from the possibility of error; rationality demands that our beliefs either be basic or appropriately supported by basic beliefs; and if we are rational in regulating our opinions, we can be assured that our beliefs are not deeply mistaken.

2 Not every philosopher has disavowed classical foundationalism. See Richard Fumerton, *Metaphysical and Epistemological Problems of Perception* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985); and Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995).

Once classical foundationalism fell, the way was cleared for discussions of the role of self-trust in our intellectual lives, but surprisingly little of this discussion has occurred. Issues of intellectual self-trust have still not received the full attention they deserve. In the sections that follow, I cite and express qualms about three trends in contemporary epistemology that help explain why this is so: the tendency to regard skeptical challenges as ill-formed; the popularity of externalist accounts of epistemic justification; and the assumption that evolutionary considerations provide assurances of the overall reliability of our intellectual faculties.

In subsequent chapters in Part One (Chapters 2 and 3), I discuss the grounds and limits of self-trust; but then in Part Two, I discuss its extension to other domains: trust in the intellectual faculties and opinions of others (Chapter 4); trust in one's own past intellectual faculties and opinions (Chapter 5); and trust in one's own future intellectual faculties and opinions (Chapter 6).

2. ATTEMPTS TO REFUTE SKEPTICISM

One of the primary attractions of classical foundationalism was that it calmed our worst skeptical fears. Even if Cartesian certainty was not to be obtained, we could at least be assured that if we are careful enough, our beliefs will be justified, and assured as well that if our beliefs are justified, they are mostly accurate. Since the fall of classical foundationalism, epistemologists have had schizophrenic attitudes toward skepticism. On the one hand, they often complain that one of the most glaring mistakes of classical foundationalists was to treat skeptical hypotheses too seriously. The evil demon and the brain-in-the-vat hypotheses come in for special scorn as being too far-fetched to be worthy of attention. On the other hand, epistemologists are more drawn than ever to proving that skeptical hypotheses cannot possibly be correct. We belittle those who stop and gawk at gruesome accidents, but when we ourselves witness an accident, we too stop and gawk. We cannot help ourselves, it seems. So it is with epistemologists and skepticism. More and more epistemologists say that radical skeptical hypotheses are not worthy of serious philosophical attention, but at the same time more and more cannot help but try their hand at refuting them. Because the refutations of classical foundationalists no longer seem promising, epistemologists are looking elsewhere to refute skepticism.

One strategy is to argue that radical skepticism is self-referentially

incoherent, because in raising their worries, would-be skeptics inevitably make use of the very intellectual faculties and methods about which they are raising doubts. In so doing, they are presupposing the general reliability of these faculties and methods. Hence, it is incoherent for them to entertain the idea that these same faculties and methods might be generally unreliable.[3]

The problem with this line of argument is that it fails to appreciate that the strategy of skeptics can be wholly negative, having the form of a reductio. Skeptics can conditionally assume, for the sake of argument, that our faculties, procedures, and methods are reliable and then try to illustrate that if employed rigorously enough, these same faculties, procedures, and methods generate evidence of their own unreliability and hence undermine themselves. Skeptics may or may not be right in making this charge, but there is nothing self-referentially incoherent about it.

A second strategy is to argue that the nature of belief, reference, or truth makes skeptical hypotheses metaphysically impossible. For example, Hilary Putnam argues that in thinking about the world it is impossible to separate out our conceptual contributions from what is "really" there. Accordingly, plausible theories of reference and truth leave no room for the possibility that the world is significantly different from what our beliefs represent it to be.[4] Donald Davidson defends an analogous position. He argues that at least in the simplest of cases, the objects of our beliefs must be taken to be the causes of them and that thus the nature of belief rules out the possibility of our beliefs being largely in error.[5]

Whatever the merits of such theories of belief, reference, and truth as metaphysical positions, they cannot lay skeptical worries completely to rest. Intricate philosophical arguments are used to defend these metaphysical theories, and these arguments can themselves be subjected to skeptical doubts. Moreover, the metaphysical positions cannot be used to dispel these doubts without begging the question.

Descartes is notorious for having attempted to use a theistic metaphysics to dispel skepticism. He claimed to have shown that God's

3 See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977); and Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

4 Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1987).

5 Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in E. LePore ed., *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 307–19.

existence is indubitable and then went on to claim that it is also indubitable that God would not permit the indubitable to be false. Not many readers of Descartes have thought that these two claims really are indubitable, but even if they were, this still would not be enough to dispel all skeptical worries, because they do not rule out the possibility of our being psychologically constituted in such a way that we find some falsehoods impossible to doubt. Any argument which tries to use the metaphysics of God to dispel this worry – for example, an argument to the effect that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, and such a God would not create beings for whom falsehoods were impossible to doubt – begs the question, even if the metaphysics is itself indubitable. The lesson, which is widely noted in discussions of the Cartesian circle, is that Descartes's theistic metaphysics cannot provide non–question-begging protection against the possibility of error.[6]

It is less widely noted but no less true that contemporary attempts to use a theory of belief, truth, or reference to rule out the possibility of widespread error are in precisely the same predicament. We have no guarantee of the general reliability of the methods and arguments used to defend these metaphysical theories, and any attempt to use the theories themselves to provide the guarantees begs the question. The lesson, as with Descartes, is that these metaphysical systems cannot altogether extinguish skeptical worries. Regardless of how we marshal our intellectual resources, there can be no non–question-begging assurances that the resulting inquiry is reliable; and this constraint applies to metaphysical inquiries into the nature of truth, belief, and reference as much it does to any other kind of inquiry.

3. EXTERNALISM AND THE ANALYSIS OF KNOWLEDGE

In "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," W. V. O. Quine attacks the analytic/synthetic distinction and with it the conception of philosophy as a

6 Descartes himself occasionally seems to recognize this point. In his "Second Set of Replies," he says the following: "Now if this conviction is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask: we have everything we could reasonably want. What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged "absolute falsity" bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it?" J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, trans., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 103–4.

discipline that seeks to uncover analytic truths.[7] According to Quine, there are no analytic truths and, hence, it cannot be philosophy's job to reveal them. Rather, philosophy is best understood as being continuous with science. Our theories and concepts are to be tested by how well they collectively meet the test of observation, and philosophy is a partner with science in this testing enterprise. This conception of philosophy helped initiate the movement to naturalize epistemology, but it also had the effect of nourishing suspicions about the project of defining knowledge, which was receiving an enormous amount of philosophical attention in the aftermath of Edmund Gettier's 1963 article, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"[8]

Gettier presents a pair of counterexamples designed to illustrate that knowledge cannot be adequately defined as justified true belief. The basic idea behind both counterexamples is that one can be justified in believing a falsehood P from which one deduces a truth Q, in which case one has a justified true belief in Q but does not know Q. Gettier's article inspired a host of similar counterexamples, and the search was on for a fourth condition of knowledge, one that could be added to justification, truth, and belief to produce an adequate analysis of knowledge. However, during this same period, the influence of Quine's attack on the analytic/synthetic grew, spreading with it the idea that conceptual analysis was, if not impossible, at least uninteresting. The literature on defining knowledge came to be cited as the clearest illustration of just how uninteresting conceptual analysis is. The proposed analyses of knowledge were often clever, but critics questioned whether they told us anything significant about how cognition works or how it can be improved. At best the analyses only seem to tell us something about the intuitions of twentieth-century English speakers trained in philosophy as to what counts as knowledge.

The doubts about analysis persist today, but despite them, something which closely mimics conceptual analysis is still widely practiced in epistemology and in philosophy generally. Even epistemologists who think that no statement is analytically true go to great lengths to distinguish and elucidate epistemological concepts. The result is something that looks very much like analysis but without the pretense that one has given a list of precise necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept.

7 Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1961), 20–46.

8 Edmund L. Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis*, 25 (1963), 121–3.

On the other hand, what has changed significantly is the content of many of these close cousins of analyses. The movement to naturalize epistemology had a major role in encouraging this change, although a little historical background is needed to show how.

The initial response to Gettier's counterexamples was to look for ways of restricting or complicating the justification condition for knowledge. Some epistemologists proposed that knowledge is nondefectively justified true belief, where a justification is nondefective if (roughly) it does not justify any falsehood.[9] Others proposed that knowledge is indefeasibly justified true belief, where a justification is indefeasible if (roughly) it cannot be defeated by the addition of any true statement.[10] However, a secondary but ultimately more influential response to Gettier's counterexamples was to wonder whether something less explicitly intellectual than justification, traditionally understood, is better suited for elucidating knowledge. Justification is closely associated with having or being able to generate an argument in defense of one's beliefs, but in many instances of knowledge, nothing even resembling an argument seems to be involved.

Alvin Goldman played an especially interesting and important role in shaping this response. He was an early champion of a causal theory of knowledge. In a 1967 article, he contends that knowledge requires an appropriate causal connection between the fact that makes a belief true and the person's having that belief.[11] This proposal nicely handled the original cases described by Gettier, but it ran into other problems. Knowledge of mathematics, general facts, and the future proved particularly difficult to account for on this approach. Nevertheless, Goldman's recommendation captivated many epistemologists, in part because it fit well with the view of knowledge implicit in the emerging naturalized epistemology movement. According to this view, knowledge is best conceived as arising "naturally" from our complex causal interactions

9 See, for example, Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 102–18; Ernest Sosa, "Epistemic Presupposition," in G. Pappas, ed., *Justification and Knowledge* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979), 79–92; and Ernest Sosa, "How Do You Know?" in E. Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19–34.

10 See, for example, Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Peter Klein, *Certainty: A Refutation of Scepticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981); Keith Lehrer, *Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); John Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986); and Marshall Swain, *Reasons and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

11 Alvin Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 64, 357–72.

with our environment. To think of knowledge principally in terms of our having a justification for our beliefs is to overly intellectualize the notion. Some kinds of knowledge, especially highly theoretical knowledge, might involve justification, but other kinds typically do not, for example, simple perceptual knowledge. Our perceptual equipment collects and processes information from our environment and adjusts our opinions accordingly, all without argument or deliberation except in unusual cases.

Thus, in the eyes of many philosophers, Goldman's causal theory of knowledge, whatever its specific defects, had the virtue of shifting the focus away from questions of our being able to justify our beliefs intellectually and toward questions of our being in an appropriate causal or causal-like relation with our external environment. The philosophical task, according to this way of thinking about knowledge, is to identify the precise character of this relation. A simple causal connection between the fact that makes a belief true and the belief itself won't do. So, some other 'natural' relation needs to be found.

There has been no shortage of proposals,[12] but it was Goldman again who formulated the view that had the widest appeal, the reliability theory of knowledge. Contrary to what he had proposed earlier, Goldman here argues that for a person's belief to count as knowledge, it is not necessary that the belief be caused by the fact that makes it true, although this will often be the case. It is necessary, however, that the processes, faculties, and methods that produced or sustain the belief be highly reliable.[13]

Reliability theories of knowledge led in turn to new accounts of epistemic justification, specifically, externalist ones. Initially, reliabilism was part of a reaction against justification-driven accounts of knowledge, but an assumption drawn from the old epistemology tempted reliabilists to reconceive justification as well. The assumption is that, by definition, justification is that which has to be added to true belief to generate knowledge (with some fourth condition added to handle Gettier-style counterexamples). Goldman had already argued that knowledge is relia-

12 For example, see D. M. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth, and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Fred Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981); Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Ernest Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective*, especially Chapters 13–16.

13 Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).