

## Précis of *Warrant: The Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function* \*

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In *Warrant: the Current Debate* I noted first that 20th century British and American Epistemology has been dominated by internalist notions, the most important of which is justification. I also noted that contemporary epistemology presents a vast, confused, and confusing welter of views, and that in two crucial respects. First, there is a great deal of confusion as to what the connection is between justification, on the one hand, and rationality, knowledge, evidence, and internalist constraints on the other.

Second, there is confusion as to the relation between warrant (that property or quantity that distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief) and justification. And thirdly, there is the same confused and confusing welter of opinion as to what justification itself is. (Among some of the more popular candidates: justification is taken as a matter of epistemic responsibility or aptness for epistemic duty fulfillment, as an "evaluation" of how well you have fulfilled your epistemic goals, as being believed or accepted on the basis of an adequate truth-conducive ground, as being produced by a reliable belief-producing mechanism, as being supported by or fitting the evidence, and as a matter of everything's going right, for the knowing subject, with respect to cognitive processes 'downstream from experience'.)

I argued that order can be introduced into this chaos by tracing the notion of justification back to its source in the classical deontologism of Descartes and especially Locke, both of whom speak of epistemic duty or obligation. Locke sees our main epistemic duty as that of proportioning belief to the evidence afforded by what is certain: my duty is to believe a proposition that isn't certain for me to the degree to which it is probable with respect to what is certain for me. Now some contemporaries (BonJour, the classical Chisholm) explicitly explain justification as epistemic responsibility or aptness for epistemic duty fulfillment, thus following the deontological lead of

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\* Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. xii, 228; Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. xii, 243.

Descartes and Locke; others (Alston, Conee and Feldman, many others) explain justification as believing on the basis of evidence, i.e., in terms of the content of what Locke sees as the principal epistemic duty. Still other views (Lehrer, Cohen) can be understood as related to that original deontological notion by way of analogical extensions of one sort or another. And in still other cases (Goldman), there is no conceptual connection with that deontological notion, but on a verbal connection: justification is used as a name for that quality or quantity, whatever it is, enough of which is sufficient to turn true belief into knowledge.

Turning to an examination of contemporary internalist accounts of warrant, I argued that it is characteristic of internalist accounts to see warrant as essentially a matter of justification, or perhaps justification together with a fillip to mollify Gettier. We began with the impressive work of Roderick Chisholm; what we saw was that justification, fulfillment of epistemic duty, is neither necessary nor anywhere nearly sufficient for warrant. Chisholmian justificationism founders on the rock of epistemic malfunction. (You can be doing your duty to the uttermost, but because of malfunction still fail to know.) The same goes for coherentism, whether taken neat or in the perceptive, sophisticated form put on offer by Laurence Bonjour. Turning to Bayesianism, a specifically 20th century form of coherentism, we observed that it has little to contribute to an account of warrant, being focused instead on that baffling, elusive, pluriform notion of rationality: what the Bayesian offers is really a picture of rationality, a picture that is extended and idealized in one particular direction. Failing to find a satisfying account of warrant among the unequivocal internalists, we turned next to the equivocal internalism of John Pollock, whose work occupies an interesting but uneasy halfway house between internalism and externalism; here too there were serious difficulties. We then moved to the explicitly externalist and reliabilist accounts of Alston, Goldman, and Dretske. Reliabilism is a substantial step in the right direction, a zeroeth approximation to the truth. Still, it suffers from deeply debilitating problems—problems which center, once again, on the notion of cognitive dysfunction. The difficulties these views face suggest that the notion of proper function is much more deeply involved in our idea of warrant than is currently recognized. In *Warrant and Proper Function* I follow out and develop this suggestion. Our notion of warrant is not best explained just by producing a set of severally necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. Such a procedure is at home in logic and mathematics; it works somewhat less well in, say, the metaphysics of modality, and it works still less well in epistemology. What we really have are paradigms: central, clear, and unequivocal cases of knowledge and warrant surrounded by a penumbral zone of analogically related possible cases that don't conform exactly to the conditions characterizing the central cases; and there are borderline cases between

the central paradigmatic cases and those comprising the analogical zone, as well as between the latter and cases where warrant clearly isn't present. I proposed to specify the conditions governing the central paradigmatic core (here necessary and sufficient conditions are appropriate) together with some of the analogical extensions and an explanation of the bases of the extension. This procedure is less elegant and more complex than the straightforward analysis we learned at our mother's knee; it is less stylish than setting out, in an austere clause or two, the necessary and sufficient conditions governing the concept. But it can lead us closer to the truth.

The notion of proper function, I say, is crucial to the central paradigms of knowledge and warrant. But that notion is inextricably linked with another: that of the design plan of the organ or organism or system in question—the way the thing in question is supposed to work, the way it works when it works properly, when it is subject to no dysfunction. So the central notion with respect to warrant is proper function; but we might as well say that the central notion is that of the design plan. In any event, the first condition for a belief's having warrant, as I see it, is that it be produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly. A second condition is that the cognitive environment in which the belief is produced must be the one or like the one for which it is designed.

There are two further conditions. First, not nearly every case of cognitive proper function is aimed at the production of true beliefs. For example, many beliefs are formed partly as a result of wishful thinking, e.g.; and it is not at all clear that what we have there is epistemic malfunction. Wishful thinking has its purposes, even if forming beliefs with maximal verisimilitude is not among them. Beliefs of this sort, then, are produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties in the environment for which those faculties were designed; nevertheless they lack warrant. So a further condition must be added; to have warrant, a belief must also be such that the purpose of the module of the epistemic faculties producing the belief is to produce true beliefs. Finally, the design plan of the faculties in question must be a good one; that is, that there be a substantial objective probability that a belief of that sort produced under those conditions is true. (If our faculties were designed by one of Hume's lazy or incompetent or immature angels, then the fourth condition might not be met even if the first three were.)

After outlining the central idea, I turn to a number of qualifications having to do with the design plan. Then in the next few chapters I explore some of the main areas of our epistemic establishment, turning successively to memory, knowledge of one's self, knowledge of other persons, perception, *a priori* knowledge and belief, induction, and probability. I next explore certain general features of the epistemic design plan: its foundationalist structure, the defeater and overrider system, and the place of evidence. Then I argue that it is

extremely difficult to see how to give anything like a naturalistic account or analysis of the notions of proper function, design plan, and their colleagues in that circle of interdefinable notions. Hence, while the view that I am proposing indisputably falls under the rubric of 'naturalistic epistemology', I claim that the latter flourishes much better in the garden of supernatural theism than in that of metaphysical or theological naturalism. In the final chapter I take this idea further by considering the conjunction of metaphysical naturalism with the view that we and our cognitive faculties have come to be by way of the mechanisms suggested by current evolutionary theory: I argued that this conjunction is in a certain way self-referentially incoherent and therefore can't be rationally accepted.