

Easy Knowledge, Junk Knowledge: Knowledge Nonetheless

Katia Vavova
Mount Holyoke College

(Mini) Abstract. I argue that epistemic bootstrapping is an inevitable ugly we must accept if we opt for externalist views like reliabilism. But, I also argue, bootstrapping is not so ugly—or at least reliabilists shouldn't think that it is. Bootstrapping only looks bad through an internalist lens. This is because the sorts of knowledge that is “too easily” generated by a reliabilist view will generally be quite useless on that view. In particular, we won't be able to do with it all the naughty things that internalists think we can do with knowledge. In short, it *seems* worrying that externalists views allow for bootstrapping. But if you are really an externalist, then bootstrapping is nothing to worry about. I close with some thoughts about what a truly externalist position looks like.

Reliabilists hold that knowledge is reliably produced true belief. Like other externalists, reliabilists do not require further that you know, or even have reason to believe that your belief is reliably formed, in order for that belief to count as knowledge. In other words, reliabilists deny the **Antecedent Knowledge Requirement**: a potential knowledge source K can yield knowledge for S, only if S first knows that K is reliable.

This famously leads to bootstrapping: if I can use my, unbeknownst to me, reliable color vision to learn that the carpet is blue, then I can combine this with my knowledge that the carpet *seems* to me to be blue, and gain evidence for the reliability of my color vision. After all, if the carpet seemed blue and it is blue, then my color vision was accurate in this instance. That is some evidence for its reliability. But it is absurd that I could gain evidence for my own reliability *just like that*.

Consensus has it that bootstrapping is bad and no reasonable epistemological theory should allow for it (cf. Cohen [2002], Elga [2006], Fumerton [1995], Vogel [2000], and White [2006]). It is absurd that you could come to know that your color vision is reliable simply by noting how things seem to you. Yet reliabilists and others who deny the Antecedent Knowledge Requirement seem committed to the legitimacy of what looks like patently poor reasoning.

The Worry: Reliabilism is in trouble because it allows us to know what we have no reason to believe. It allows us to know *p* even if we are not rational in believing that *p*. On this diagnosis, the bootstrapping objection is a way of making explicit the sorts of Norman-the-clairvoyant worries internalists had all along. (Cf. Bonjour.)

Available Responses. Jonathan Vogel thinks we should reject externalism because it allows for bootstrapping. This is a nice solution to the problem—unless, of course, you are an externalist.

James van Cleve argues that alternative theories lead to massive skepticism: so he concludes that we should take what we can get, even if it is somehow “too easy”. This is just to bite the bullet and learn to live with bootstrapping in all its counterintuitive glory.

The least exasperated and most reliabilist friendly response comes from Hilary Kornblith. He argues that not all ways of bootstrapping are created equal: some are more reliable than others. And reliabilism is only committed to the reliable ones producing such knowledge. The problem with this response is that it doesn't get rid of that icky feeling that bootstrapping gives us. Even reliable instances of bootstrapping seem bad. It just seems like you shouldn't be able to get knowledge of your own reliability by merely noting how things seem to you. Even if that is a reliable way of gaining knowledge. (It would help Kornblith if there were an explanation of the remaining ickiness, which helped to minimize or mitigate it somehow. What I hope to accomplish here might go some ways in this direction.)

There are benefits and drawbacks to each of these strategies. I will not evaluate them here. Instead, I will suggest a novel way out.

An Alternative Solution. My starting point is this: reliabilism as we have defined it is silent on what we 'ought' to believe, in many senses of 'ought'. It is silent on what it is rational for us to believe, what we have reason to believe, what it is epistemically responsible for us to believe, and so forth. Nothing in the reliabilist's position on knowledge commits her to anything about how we should understand rationality, justification, and the like. So it is entirely open to the reliabilist to hold that what we know and what we ought to believe come apart: so that I can know that my color vision is reliable, but I ought not believe that because I have no reason to, it wouldn't be rational to, etc. Furthermore, separating these things (reasons/rationality/justification and knowledge) is very much in the spirit of reliabilism. Though knowledge reliabilism may be combined with justification reliabilism, it needn't be. One can consistently deny the Antecedent Knowledge Requirement and yet remain silent or insist on an analogous requirement for justification.

Once we realize that reliabilists can separate the conditions of knowledge from the rules of reasoning, the dialectic of the bootstrapping debate changes dramatically. The reliabilist has a straightforward response to The Worry: Reliabilism does allow us to know what we have no reason to believe, but that's ok. This knowledge, is in a sense, junk knowledge: we cannot use it in all the ways and for all the purposes that we typically expect to be able to use knowledge. In particular: we cannot reason with this knowledge. This knowledge is thus easy, but also impotent. It doesn't get in all the trouble that the internalist thinks it gets. So we shouldn't worry about it. Not, at least, so long as we are externalists.

The resulting view has two parts. First, it separates knowledge from justification, rationality, and the like. It denies that the latter is a component of the former (as per the standard justified-true-belief-plus account of knowledge). I also deny that the latter is to be explained in terms of the former (as per more recent knowledge-first epistemology, cf. Williamson [2002]). Others have suggested severing the connection between knowledge and justification, but not, as far as I know, to this extent (cf. Foley [2002], [forthcoming], and [ms.], and Lasonen Aarnio [2010]).

Second, it rejects the antecedent requirement for knowledge, so that you can know the colors of things simply in virtue of having the right sort of connection to them. This is compatible with maintaining an analogous antecedence requirement for justification. So although you can know that the carpet is blue just by looking at it, that does not automatically allow you to reason with

the proposition that it is blue—at least not in a way that can produce more knowledge, justification, or other epistemic goods.

This second move, the claim that knowledge is not something we are automatically entitled to reason with, is the crucial point upon which everything else rests. It is what leads to easy knowledge, but it is also what makes this easy knowledge *junk* knowledge—knowledge we cannot do anything with. It is thus that my view mitigates the most severe consequences of rejecting the antecedent knowledge requirement.

Conclusion. I have argued that this is a promising solution to the bootstrapping problem for reliabilism. It seems to mitigate bootstrapping's bad consequences while holding on to the essence of reliabilism. Unfortunately, this way of solving the bootstrapping problem for reliabilists thus undermines our motivation for being reliabilist. Motivations for externalism more generally, however, remain. Whatever reason we have for adopting this version of reliabilism it also give us reason to adopt as simpler view with all the same benefits: namely, that knowledge is just true belief. So if we are externalists, and if we want to avoid bootstrapping, we should not be reliabilists.

References

- Lasonen Aarnio, M. [2010] "Unreasonable Knowledge" in *Philosophical Perspectives*, 24, pp 1-21.
- Armstrong, D. [1973] *Belief, Truth, and Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press.
- Audi, R. [2001] "An internalist theory of normative grounds" in *Philosophical Topics*, 29, 1 & 2, 2002, 19-46.
- Baumeister, R. [2005]. *The cultural animal*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bonjour, L. [1980] "Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge" in Kornblith, H. (ed.), *Epistemology: Internalism and Externalism*, Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
- Cohen, S. [2002] "Basic Knowledge and the Problem of Easy Knowledge" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LXV, No. 2, September.
- Cohen, S. [2005] "Why Basic Knowledge is Easy Knowledge" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LXX, No. 2.
- Conee, E. and R. Feldman [2004] "Internalism Defended" in E. Conee and R. Feldman (eds.), *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*, Clarendon Press.
- Chisholm, R.M. [1973] *The Problem of the Criterion*, Marquette University Press.
- Dretske, F. [1983] *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press.
- Elga, A. [2007] "Reflection and Disagreement" in *Noûs*, 41:478–502.
- Feldman, R. [2005] "Respecting the Evidence." *Philosophical Perspectives* 19, 95-119.
- Foley, R. [1993] "What Am I to Believe?" in Kornblith, H. (ed.), *Epistemology: Internalism and Externalism*, Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
- Foley, R. [2002] "Review of *Knowledge and Its Limits* by Timothy Williamson" in *Mind*, 718-726.
- Foley, R. [forthcoming] "What must be added to true belief to get knowledge? Just more true belief", forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
- Foley, R. [ms.] *Knowledge as Adequate Information*, Draft, May 12, 2010.
- Fumerton, R. [1995] *Meta-Epistemology and Skepticism*, Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Gendler, T.S. [2008] "Alief and Belief" in *Journal of Philosophy*.
- Gendler, T.S. [2008a] "Alief in Action (and Reaction)" in *Mind and Language*.
- Gettier, E. [1963] "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" in *Analysis* 23: 121-123.
- Goldman, A. [1967] "A Causal Theory of Knowing" in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 64 (12): 357-372.
- Goldman, A. [1979] "What is Justified Belief?" in *Justification and Knowledge*, G. Pappas (eds.), Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Kahneman, D., P. Slovic, & A. Tversky (eds.) [1982], *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, Cambridge University Press.
- Kornblith, H. [2001] *Epistemology: Internalism and Externalism*, Blackwell Publishers.
- Kornblith, H. [2008] "Knowledge Needs No Justification" in *Epistemology: new essays*, Oxford University Press.
- Kornblith, H. [2009] "A Reliabilist Solution to the Problem of Promiscuous Bootstrapping" in *Analysis*, 69: 263-267.
- Nozick, R. [1981] *Philosophical Explanations*, Harvard University Press.
- Slooman S.A. [1996] "The empirical case for two systems of reasoning" in *Psychological Bulletin*, 119, 3-22.
- Sorensen, R. [2002] "Formal Problems About Knowledge" in P. Moser (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, Oxford University Press.
- Stroud, B. [1989] "Understanding Human Knowledge in General" in Kornblith, H. (ed.), *Epistemology: Internalism and Externalism*, Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
- Van Cleve, J. [2003] "Is Knowledge Easy — or Impossible? Externalism as the only alternative to skepticism" in Stephen Luper (ed.) *The Sceptics: Contemporary Essays*, Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Company, 45-59.
- Vogel, J. [2000] "Reliabilism Leveled" in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 97, No. 11, pp. 602-623.
- Vogel, J. [2008] "Epistemic Bootstrapping" in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 105(9): 518-539.
- Weisberg, J. [forthcoming] "Bootstrapping in General" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
- White, R. [2006] "Problems for Dogmatism" in *Philosophical Studies* 131, pp. 525-557.
- Wright, C. [2004] "Warrant for nothing (and foundations for free)?" *Aristotelian Society Supplement* 78, 167-212.
- Williamson, T. [2007] "On Being Justified in One's Head" in M. Timmons, J. Greco, and A. Mele (eds.) *Rationality and the Good: Critical Essays on the Ethics and Epistemology of Robert Audi*, Oxford University Press, pp. 106-121.
- Williamson, T. [2002] *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, T. [2002]. *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.