Does Evidence Flow?
UC Berkeley
Philosophy 290-2: Recent Topics in Epistemology

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1   The Question

- How seriously should we take the metaphor of "evidential flow" that appears in lots of places in epistemology?

    - Distinction between undercutting and rebutting/opposing defeat
    - Transmission failure
    - Doxastic vs. propositional justification

- I'm assuming a fairly standard (though not completely uncontroversial) sort of factualism about epistemological discourse

    - Some people have proposed expressivist semantics for epistemological discourse, motivated by many of the same considerations as expressivism about ethical discourse
    - Hartry Field's recent paper "Epistemology Without Metaphysics" (*Philosophical Studies* 143(2), 2009) makes fun of the flow picture that I have in mind, but does so in the service of developing a nonfactualist "expressivist relativism"
        * "A common picture of justification among epistemologists is that typically when a person is looking at something red, her sense impressions pump in a certain amount of justification for the belief that there is something red in front of her; but that there can be contrary considerations (e.g. testimony by others that there is nothing red there, at least when backed by evidence that the testimony is reliable) that may pump some of this justification out. In addition, the justification provided by the senses can be fully or partially

undercut, say by evidence that the lighting may be bad: this involves creating a leak (perhaps only a small one) in the pipe from sense impressions to belief, so that not all of the justification gets through. On this picture, the job of the epistemologist is to come up with an epistemological dipstick that will measure what overall level of justification we end up with in any given situation. (Presumably the "fluid" to be measured is immaterial, so it takes advanced training in recent epistemological techniques to come up with an accurate dipstick.)"

* "The basic idea I want to develop is that regarding a belief as justified (or reasonable, or rational, or whatever) is evaluating it, and evaluations aren't straightforwardly factual."

* Similar in spirit to Max Kolbel's "Indexical Relativism vs. Genuine Relativism" (*International J. of Phil. Studies* 12, 2004) and John MacFarlane's "Making Sense of Relative Truth" (*Proc. Arist. Soc.* 105, 2005)

- I'm not asking the metaphysical question of whether there is any (abstract) justificatory fluid, or whether it "moves" in this way or that

  – I'm asking the question of whether there is an *epistemological* phenomenon of justification flowing from one proposition to another: in other words, if there are *epistemic* truths that somehow require Flow to be a genuine epistemic phenomenon

  – Maybe those two questions are related, but I want to remain agnostic

  – Compare: Someone might wonder whether there's a phenomenon of moral luck, without caring about the metaphysics of moral luck (Is it an abstract object? How do we measure it? How much of it do I have? How do I acquire more?)

2 Connections to Other Epistemological Views

- Flow seems to be entailed by Foundationalism

  – The core of the Foundationalist view is that some beliefs (the basic ones) are justified entirely by non-beliefs (such as perceptual states), and that other beliefs (the non-basic ones) are justified at least in part by other beliefs

  – But it's hard to make sense of this picture unless justification really flows from perceptual states, through basic beliefs, and on up to non-basic beliefs

  – Possible worry: There are lots of hierarchies, and they don't all require anything to flow, so why should we think that this hierarchy of beliefs requires flow?

- Seems like Coherentism is compatible with Flow, but doesn't entail it

  - Maybe when enough beliefs are all connected in the right sort of way, they all come to have the property of being justified "at once"
  - Compare: when a bunch of atoms are all arranged in the right sort of way, they all come to have the property of being parts of a chair
  - Or maybe when enough beliefs are all connected in the right sort of way, justification starts flowing in a big circle

- Flow seems orthogonal to the internalism/externalism debate in epistemology

- Liberalism

  - Pryor-style Liberal thinks that it's not necessary for me to have antecendent justification to believe that my vision is reliable in order for me to be justified in forming visual beliefs
  - White/Wright-style Conservative thinks that it is necessary for me to have antecedent justification to believe that my vision is reliable in order for me to be justified in forming visual beliefs, and that my justification for my visual beliefs is had "in virtue of" my antecedent justification to believe that my vision is reliable
  - Silins-style Liberal says that antecedent justification to believe that my vision is reliable is a necessary condition for having justified visual beliefs, but my justification for my visual beliefs isn't had in virtue of my antecedent justification—i.e., my antecedent justification is no part of what makes my visual beliefs justified
  - Seems like "in virtue of" talk requires Flow

3   Defeat

- Distinction between undercutting and rebutting defeat

- Flow explanation of distinction

  - Undercutting: leak/blockage in the pipes
  - Rebutting: backflow in the pipe from the other direction

- Do we need Flow to make the distinction coherently?

  - My "A Formal Account of Defeat" is an attempt to give a formal characterization of the distinction that doesn't rely on anything Flow-y

- – Here's where I get to at the end of Section 5:
- – D is a rebutting (opposing) defeater for the evidence that E provides for H (relative to background information K) just in case $[p(H|E \wedge D) < p(H|E)] \wedge [p(H|D) < p(H)]$
- – D is an undercutting defeater for the evidence that E provides for H (relative to background information K) just in case $dc(E, H, K) > dc(E, H, K \wedge D)$.
- – So, if you're Branden and you think $dc(E, H, K) = \log\left(\frac{p(E|H \wedge K)}{p(E|\neg H \wedge K)}\right)$, then my story becomes:
- – D is an undercutting defeater for the evidence that E provides for H (relative to background information K) just in case $\log\left(\frac{p(E|H \wedge K)}{p(E|\neg H \wedge K)}\right) > \log\left(\frac{p(E|H \wedge K \wedge D)}{p(E|\neg H \wedge K \wedge D)}\right)$
- – Which is true just in case $\frac{p(E|H \wedge K)}{p(E|\neg H \wedge K)} > \frac{p(E|H \wedge K \wedge D)}{p(E|\neg H \wedge K \wedge D)}$

- Worry 1: My account doesn't work. I'm especially worried that I don't have anything good to say to distinguish redundancy from undercutting, in which case we might need to appeal to Flow to make the distinction

  - – Undercutting: leak/blockage in the pipes
  - – Redundancy: partial or complete redirection of flow from one pipe to another pipe that leads to the same place

- Worry 2: The formalism hides it, but my account really depends, ultimately, on Flow. $dc(E, H, K) > dc(E, H, K \wedge D)$ is true in cases of undercutting defeat, but we need Flow to explain *why* it's true

4 Transmission

- Many philosophers think that there's a virtue had by the first argument and lacked by the second argument:

  - – ANIMAL That looks like a zebra. So, it is a zebra. So, it is an animal.
  - – MULE That looks like a zebra. So, it is a zebra. So, it isn't a cleverly disguised mule.

- Let's assume that we're entitled to "That looks like a zebra" or something similar

- The next step is the same in both arguments, so the next step seems to be equally good in both arguments

- And "It is a zebra" entails both "It is an animal" and "It isn't a cleverly disguised mule," so the next step seems on a par too

- But some philosophers think that ANIMAL is a perfectly good way to come to believe, perhaps for the first time, that that's an animal, while MULE is *not* a perfectly good way to come to believe, for the first time, that that's not a cleverly disguised mule.

- Suppose we accept that verdict. Here's one possible explanation of the difference between ANIMAL and MULE:

  - In order for your zebra-experience to jusitfy you in believing that that's a zebra, you don't need to have any prior, antecedent, justification to believe that that's an animal.
  - Before you have the zebra-experience, it's fine if you have no view about whether there are any animals around here
  - Your zebra experience can give you justification to believe that there are animals around here, even if you didn't already have it
  - By contrast, in order for your zebra-experience to justify you in believing that that's a zebra, you *do* need to have some prior, antecedent, justification to believe that that's not a cleverly disguised mule
  - Before you have the zebra-experience, it's not fine if you have no view about whether there are any cleverly disguised mules around here
  - You need to have some antecedent justification to believe that there are no cleverly disguised mules around here (and hence that that's not a cleverly disguised mule) in order for your zebra-experience to justify the belief that that's a zebra
  - Your zebra-experience can't give you that justification to believe that there aren't any cleverly disguised mules around here; you had to already have it before you had the zebra-experience

- Flow Analysis

  - Justification for "that's not a cleverly disguised mule" makes it possible for justification to flow from the zebra-experience to "that's a zebra"
  - I.e., the pipe from the experience to "that's a zebra" is blocked by default, and only gets unblocked when you acquire justification to believe "that's not a cleverly disguised mule"
  - So, justification can't flow from "that's a zebra" to "that's not a cleverly disguised mule" because then justification would be flowing in a sort of circle
  - Not so with "that's an animal"—justification for that proposition isn't part of what unblocks the pipe from the experience to "that's a zebra"
  - So justification can "transmit" from "that's a zebra" to "that's an animal"—that flow doesn't entail circular flow

- I have a story about transmission: the evidence that E provides for $H1$ transmits to $H2$ when $p(H2) < p(H1|E)$

    - Worry 1: Nose objection
    - Worry 2: Again, we need Flow to explain why my story is true

5   Doxastic vs. Propositional Justification

- Distinction between doxastic and propositional justification

- Flow analysis

    - Doxastic justification occurs when your inference (at least roughly) matches the flow of propositional justification

- Can we explain the distinction without appealing to Flow?