

Fundamental vs. Derivative; Useful vs. Useless: A Response to Bland
Richard Fumerton, University of Iowa

I agree with much of what Steven Bland argues in “Circularity, Scepticism and Epistemic Relativism.”¹ In particular, I agree that on a certain way of understanding the non-circularity condition (NC), which the skeptic insists on, knowledge and justified belief cannot be satisfied. NC requires that a satisfying response to a skeptical challenge must find a way of justifying an epistemic framework that does not presuppose the framework it is intended to justify. On its strongest reading, NC would be a version of Stroud’s requirement for a non-question begging response to the skeptic.² In its crudest form, the challenge is to find a way of arguing for the legitimacy of *all* of our ways of forming beliefs, and to do so without using any of the ways we have of legitimately forming belief. As Plantinga once said—God couldn’t do that. It remains to be seen, however, how disappointed we should be at this result.

Later, Bland distinguishes arguments that are *logically* circular (arguments whose conclusion appears as a premise), and arguments that are *epistemically* circular (arguments whose conclusion is necessarily presupposed if we are to know the premises of the argument *or* know that the premises support the conclusion).³ His paper focuses on epistemic circularity. He also makes a critical distinction between two senses in which a way of forming belief might be viewed as basic. A method of forming beliefs M1 is strongly basic when one doesn’t need to use some other method of forming beliefs M2 to certify M1’s legitimacy (I prefer the term “legitimacy” to “reliability” so as not to suggest that justification is all about reliability). Bland’s example of relying on a newspaper for weather forecasts illustrates the point. I might infer some proposition about tomorrow’s weather from reading a forecast in the local paper, but for my conclusion to be justified I would surely need some reason to think that the newspaper’s forecasts are reliable.⁴ I might, for example, have a decent track record (inductive) argument whose premises describe past forecasting successes by the local paper.

On Basic Epistemic Principles

Now in the case of “inferences” from weather forecasts it might be a bit misleading to describe one who draws such inferences as relying on an epistemic *principle* (a “forecasting” principle). As one thinks about the relevant reasoning it might be more perspicuous to describe the reasoning as straightforward enumerative induction. I’ve read a lot of weather forecasts and they usually turn out to be more or less accurate. This one will as well, I conclude. The derivative forecasting “principle” simply disappears. But this is terminological. Whether one wants to restrict epistemic principles to those that are strongly basic (in Bland’s sense) or allow a plethora of principles that are established

¹ Steven Bland 2016.

² Barry Stroud 1984.

³ Bland 2016, 152.

⁴ Well, I’m probably overstating the “surely.” These days more and more philosophers argue for the view that we need no independent reason to give testimony *prima facie* credibility.

through various other sorts of reasoning is, perhaps, a matter of terminological preference.

Of the principles that are strongly basic, Bland wants to further suggest that some may still be in some sense *dependent*—they may depend on other information gained from other sources for their successful *use* in arriving at truth (I’m paraphrasing slightly here). You can’t use inductive reasoning unless you can come up with premises describing correlations of various phenomena. You could use inductive reasoning to establish the existence of *those* correlated phenomena, but that would still leave you with another inductive argument whose premises describe correlations of *something*.

It is tempting to agree with Bland that somewhere along the way we will need to rely on something other than inductive reasoning so that we formulate some premises with content from which to draw an inductive conclusion. That’s not to suggest that principles that are dependent in this way are not true. Indeed, perhaps we can *know* their truth *a priori*. But just as one can have extensive knowledge of what counts as valid deductive reasoning without having anything very useful to use as premises from which we can deduce truths in which we are interested, so also one can understand good inductive reasoning without having very many useful correlations to project. So a weakly basic epistemic principle might be like a really nice toaster. The toaster might be constructed perfectly, but you still need some bread if you are going to use the device to make toast.

Is Naturalism Preferable?

It is at this point that Bland argues that we have some sort of argument for preferring naturalistic epistemic frameworks. I’m not sure, though, that I follow what the reasoning is. Part of the problem may be that I’m not sure what makes an epistemic framework naturalistic. The argument, as I understand it, is that even if one were to embrace nonnaturalist strongly basic ways of forming beliefs, they would be useless without our naturalistic ways of forming belief. They would be useless because they would be weakly basic, and would have nothing to process absent the deliverances of “natural” ways of forming beliefs. So crystal ball gazers, those who rely on scripture, those who read the entrails of birds to predict the outcomes of battles, all need to rely on memory, perception, valid deductive reasoning, and perhaps induction, if they are going to generate conclusions. And those conclusions will have no more claim on truth than the data they processed—garbage in; garbage out. We need to rely on naturalistic methods to get anywhere. By contrast, we *don’t* need to rely on nonnaturalistic methods to have hope of arriving at truth. So we have a kind of pragmatic argument for preferring the nonnaturalist methods of forming beliefs.

As I said, I’m not sure how we are dividing methods of forming belief into those that are naturalist and those that are not. Are phenomenal conservatives naturalists? They can certainly generate all sorts of premises for use in deductive and non-deductive reasoning. Are epistemic conservatives naturalists? They get even more premises with little epistemic “effort.” Some of the radical empiricists were convinced that our

epistemological starting point is restricted to what we can know through introspection together with assorted principles of deductive and non-deductive reasoning, principles that some thought are knowable *a priori*. Those of us who think that we are sometimes directly aware of truth makers and the fit between a thought and its truthmaker are perfectly happy using direct awareness to assure ourselves that our view is true (if the question arises).

We would probably be foolish to try to convince an “acquaintance” skeptic that there is such a thing as acquaintance without relying *at all* on acquaintance. According to an acquaintance theorist, without acquaintance philosophy is completely blind. And I’m not going to try to guide someone to his destination when we are travelling in the pitch black. As Markie points out quite nicely, however, there are “rules” governing argument with another, and one of those rules is that in *debate* you don’t beg the question, logically or epistemically. But the fact that one can’t “win” an argument with one who purports not to understand introspection is no more disturbing than the realization that we can’t win an argument with someone who won’t let us presuppose the most basic laws of logic when arguing. You can’t win a game of chess with someone who won’t play chess. You can’t win an argument with someone who refuses to “play” by the rules of logic.

Radical Empiricism

So where are we? I don’t know whether radical empiricism is a naturalistic epistemological framework. If it isn’t, I don’t see how the fundamental principles presupposed by the radical empiricist require naturalistic sources of belief. Principles of inference (principles that are deductively valid, the principle of enumerative induction, Bayesian principles, principles sanctioning argument to the best explanation), are probably weakly basic (in Bland’s terminology), but they don’t presuppose the legitimacy of perception, nor do they presuppose any particular meta-epistemological view about what makes a belief justified.

If one is a foundationalist, one would seem to have an advantage over the skeptic the larger one’s foundation is. It is a long path of reasoning from premises restricted to what one knows through introspection to conclusions describing the rich world of physical objects and their properties. Whether the path is a dead end will depend largely on what sorts of reasoning one can legitimately employ. From premises describing the present contents of your mind, you are not going to *deduce* your way to the past, the physical world, or other minds, let alone the more exotic sorts of posits introduced by modern physics.

As Hume observed, induction will get you correlations between subjective perceptions, but even here you will need to rely on memory to get some grist for your inductive mill. If one thinks that basic epistemic principles are knowable *a priori*, one can throw in a principle asserting that when you seem to remember some experience that gives you *prima facie* reason to believe that the experience occurred. Indeed, if one embraces Chisholm’s particularism, you can decide what you know and are justified in believing

and give yourself as many principles as you need to get from your foundation to your desired epistemic destination.

Certain sorts of naturalism have an easier path to follow. At least they do if nature cooperates. I have argued many times that the reliabilist, for example, places no *a priori* restriction on what can count as a noninferentially justified belief. The basic idea is that a belief is noninferentially justified when it results from a process that takes as its input something other than belief and reliably generates true beliefs. Qualifications need to be added to deal with potential defeaters, ignored available evidence, and introspection of belief.

I suppose reliabilism is viewed as a paradigm of a naturalistic epistemology, but as far as I can tell, there is nothing in the view that places any restriction on what the input to a reliable belief-producing process might be. An angel whispering in my ear at night, a crystal ball given to me by an angel, both might send signals that reliably cause me to believe relevant truths. I don't know much about such matters, but I gather that crystal ball readers claim to be relying on sight to notice various features of the ball. But the practice wouldn't seem much stranger if the ball "reader" just held the ball to the forehead hoping to "see" that which has not yet happened. And it is not impossible that there be a reliable way of forming beliefs this way. There isn't, but there could be. The point is just that I don't why a view like reliabilism isn't completely neutral from a philosophical perspective on what kind of mechanisms might yield justified belief. Those justified beliefs can be the input to any number of weakly basic epistemic principles.

Contact details: richard-fumerton@uiowa.edu

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