

Similarity & Acquaintance: A dilemma

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Abstract: There is an interesting and instructive problem with Richard Fumerton's acquaintance theory of noninferential justification. Fumerton's explicit account requires acquaintance with the truth-maker of one's belief and yet he admits that one can have noninferential justification when one is *not* acquainted with the truth-maker of one's belief but instead acquainted with a very similar truth-maker. On the face of it this problem calls for clarification. However, there are skeptical issues lurking in the background. This paper explores these issues by developing a dilemma for an acquaintance theory.

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I. The conflict

Fumerton's explicit account of noninferential justification is as follows:

[O]ne has a noninferentially justified belief that P when one has the thought that P and one is acquainted with the fact that P, the thought that P, *and* the relation of correspondence holding between the thought that P and the fact that P.¹

Later on the same page Fumerton indicates that these conditions are necessary as well:

[W]hat one needs to end a regress of justification is direct confrontation with *truth*. To secure that confrontation, one needs to be directly aware of not just a truth-maker (a fact to which a truth corresponds) but also a truth-bearer (a thought) and the correspondence that holds between them.²

In another article Fumerton says,

The state that constitutes noninferential justification is a state that contains as constituents both the bearer of truth value and the truth-maker.³

And elsewhere Fumerton writes,

I hold that one is *only* non-inferentially justified in believing a proposition p when one is directly acquainted with the fact that p while one has the thought that p and one is acquainted with a correspondence between the thought and the fact.⁴

So, we can characterize Fumerton's account as follows:

(NIJ) S has a noninferentially justified belief that p iff S is acquainted with (i) the fact that p, (ii) the thought that p, and (iii) the relation of correspondence holding between the fact that p and the thought that p.

¹ Fumerton (1995), 75.

² Ibid. Both Ernest Sosa and Michael Bergmann interpret Fumerton's account as including this necessary condition. See Bergmann (2006), 29-30 and Sosa in BonJour & Sosa (2003), 130.

³ Fumerton (2001), 14.

⁴ Fumerton (2005), 88.

In other places, though, Fumerton admits that it's possible to have a noninferentially justified *false* belief, and so *not* be acquainted with the truth-maker of one's belief. Fumerton writes,

I also argue that it may be possible on an acquaintance theory to have noninferential justification that does not entail the truth of what is believed. Specifically, ... one might be acquainted with a fact very similar to the fact that makes P true, and such acquaintance might give one a justified but false belief that P.⁵

In another passage Fumerton writes,

It seemed to me that acquaintance with a fact very similar to the fact that would have made P true might noninferentially justify me in believing that P (when I have the thought that P and am acquainted with a relation very much like correspondence holding between the thought that P and the spurious fact that P).⁶

Additionally Fumerton concedes,

I have ... allowed that one can have a noninferentially justified false belief. Although it has never been completely obvious to me what to say about this, I have somewhat reluctantly conceded that one can have noninferential justification for believing that one is in a certain sensory state, where that justification consists in the fact that one is directly acquainted with a different, but *very similar* sensory state.⁷

So there is this puzzle in Fumerton's acquaintance theory: is acquaintance with the truth-maker of one's belief a necessary condition for noninferential justification? I think this question is quite difficult to answer. In order to see this let us investigate the consequences of each way of answering the question. This amounts to a dilemma for an acquaintance theory.

⁵ Fumerton (1995), 77.

⁶ Ibid., 186.

⁷ Fumerton (2001b), 74.

II. The first horn – no changes to (NIJ)

On the first horn of the dilemma acquaintance with the truth-maker of one's belief is a necessary condition for noninferential justification. In order to assess the plausibility of this claim let us step back and ask ourselves why one is even motivated to appeal to acquaintance in the first place. As Fumerton has stressed the main motivation for requiring acquaintance with truth-makers is to get the kind of assurance one wants as a philosopher.⁸ This requires getting the truth-maker itself present before one's consciousness, where the truth-maker is “‘there’ *transparently* before [one's] mind.”⁹ Note how this assurance is tied to a transparency thesis. One has this assurance because the truth-maker itself is transparent before one's mind. This issue of transparency is the main motivation for requiring acquaintance with truth-makers.

Elsewhere Fumerton writes,

Intuitively, one wants the relevant sort of infallible justification to include as a constituent the truth-maker of the belief and to include it in a way that renders the belief based on that justification *transparently* true. One wants the truth-maker “before” one's consciousness in a way that provides complete intellectual assurance concerning the truth of what one believes.¹⁰

Apart from some transparency thesis an acquaintance theory is unmotivated. If one's being acquainted with the truth-maker of one's belief (together with acquaintance with the relevant thought and the correspondence between the thought and the fact) does not make one's belief transparently true then it's not clear how an acquaintance theory of noninferential justification is any better off than some less onerous theory of noninferential justification.¹¹ A distinct advantage for an acquaintance theory is the alleged ability to end the regress of reasons in a state

⁸ Fumerton (2006), 189.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Fumerton (2005), 122.

¹¹ For instance, a version of phenomenal conservatism according to which seemings confer noninferential justification on beliefs about aspects of the external world (see Huemer (2001)).

in which the truth-maker of one's belief is transparently present. Apart from this advantage it's not clear what reason we have to prefer an acquaintance theory over some other less demanding account of noninferential justification.

The problem with the possibility of very similar truth-makers is that it undermines precisely this advantage by undercutting the transparency thesis. In order to align Fumerton's emphasis on transparency with his account of non-inferential justification it is plausible to render the transparency thesis as follows:

(TT) If one is acquainted with the thought that *p*, the fact that *p*, and the correspondence between the fact that *p* and the thought that *p* then one's belief is transparently true.

Given (TT) satisfying the conditions of (NIJ) makes one's belief transparently true. However the problem of very similar truth-makers shows that (TT) is false. For instance if one is acquainted with a red sense-data that is very similar to a orange sense-data then one's belief is not transparently true; for one could be in a very similar state—acquainted with the orange sense-data—that one mistakes for being acquainted with a red item. Similarly if one is acquainted with a pain that is very similar to an itch then, even assuming the other conditions of (TT) are satisfied, one's belief that one is in pain is not transparently true.

One reply to this objection is to strengthen the antecedent of (TT) so that it holds only for facts for which there isn't a very similar fact. This yields,

(TT*) If one is acquainted with the thought that *p*, the fact that *p*, and the correspondence between the fact that *p* and the thought that *p* *and there is not a very similar fact that q such that one can easily mistake q for p* then one's belief is transparently true.

There are two problems with appeal to (TT*). The first problem for (TT*) is that it seems to rule out too much, consequently leaving an inadequate foundation for a non-skeptical epistemology.

It rules out a host of color judgments since it is plausible that one can easily be mistaken about a large number of color judgments. Moreover, it rules out most shape judgments since one might easily mistake a parallelogram for a square or an oval for a circle. And if color and shape beliefs aren't transparently true it's difficult to see that whatever is left will make an adequate foundation for a non-skeptical epistemology.

The second problem for (TT*) is related to the fact that transparency is dependent upon a subject's beliefs. Suppose one is acquainted with the thought that one is in pain, the fact that one is in pain, and the correspondence between the two. Moreover, assume that one cannot easily mistake the fact that one is in pain with the fact that one has an itch. And *yet* one is firmly convinced that one may easily mistake an itch for a pain. One has read, for instance, Daniel Dennett's article "Quining Qualia"¹² and Dennett's argument has convinced one that a neuroscientist could switch one's memory based dispositions to respond to pains and itches such that one may easily mistake an itch for a pain. Whether or not this is genuinely possible does not matter; as long as one is convinced that this is a possibility it undermines the transparency of the belief that one is in pain.¹³

The lesson we should draw from this is that it needn't be a genuine possibility that there are very similar truth-makers that one might easily mistake for the real thing. As long as one believes it is so that is sufficient to undermine transparency. The problem of very similar truth-makers doesn't require the *genuine* possibility of very similar truth-makers but only the *intentional* possibility, i.e., only the ability to believe that there are such possibilities. I shall refer to this as the argument from intentional possibilities.

¹² Dennett (2002).

¹³ The issue here does not depend on the irrationality of the belief that one may easily mistake itches for pains. An undergraduate may have good reasons for thinking that Dennett's conclusion is true even though the conclusion may be logically impossible.

One might be tempted to respond by saying that (i) as long as there cannot be very similar facts that one might easily mistake for the real thing, (ii) one does not believe that there are such facts, and (iii) the other conditions for (TT) are met then one's belief is transparency true. While this is an option, I think it is mistaken. Our interest in transparency is tied to our interest in defeating potential defeaters.¹⁴ If transparency cannot do that then it's just not that interesting. If a skeptic offers a sophisticated argument that I might mistake itches for pains then *if* it's transparent that I'm in pain I should be able to use that in order to defeat the skeptic's argument. And yet this response must deny that because the response envisions that I might come to believe that I could easily mistake an itch for a pain and thus it wouldn't be transparent to me that I'm in pain. Consequently, this response saves a transparency thesis only to rob it of any philosophical significance.

What should we conclude about this problem for the acquaintance theorist that opts for the first horn? I think we should conclude that one doesn't know whether or not one has noninferential justification. I've argued that acquaintance with the actual truth-maker of one's belief together with the other required conditions for noninferential justification does not make one's belief transparency true. So if one reflects on whether one has noninferential justification for believing that there's red item present one can't simply appeal to the truth-maker itself being present to consciousness; for one could easily mistake it for an orange item.

A thoroughly consistent acquaintance theorist of this variety should deny that one's noninferential justification permits one to come to know that one has this justification by reflection alone. However this is at odds with the emphasis Fumerton places on transparency. Fumerton writes, "One wants the truth-maker "before" consciousness in a way that provides

¹⁴ Nelson Goodman makes a similar point in his (somewhat neglected) contribution to the famed Lewis-Reichenbach debate. See Goodman (1952), 161.

complete intellectual assurance concerning the truth of what one believes.”¹⁵ Presumably if the truth-maker is transparently before one’s consciousness then one can reflect on this and come to know that one has noninferential justification. There’s nothing in principle that blocks one’s access to this fact. This ability to move up a level is closely tied to having *complete intellectual assurance*; for if I reflect on whether or not I have noninferential justification for believing that I’m in pain and I come to think I can’t determine whether or not I am actually in pain then I lack *complete intellectual assurance* about whether or not I’m in pain.

This issue of access requirements and an acquaintance theory has puzzled me for some time. As we’ve seen Fumerton stresses that only an acquaintance theory gives one complete intellectual assurance by getting the truth-maker of one’s belief transparently present before one’s mind. However, Fumerton has also indicated that he is not comfortable with the stress internalists put on access requirements.¹⁶ Moreover, he has indicated that an acquaintance theorist should be an access *externalist*.¹⁷ There are several different access externalist theses one of which says that access to whether one has satisfies the conditions of, e.g., (NIJ) isn’t required for (NIJ). This thesis should be accepted by everyone because its denial amounts to the claim that the conditions for (NIJ) weren’t sufficient after all. However another form of access externalism states that satisfying the conditions of non-inferential justification doesn’t itself permit an epistemic ascent argument. On standard formulations of externalism when one has non-inferential justification for some belief that doesn’t itself provide the materials to come to know that one has non-inferential justification for that belief. As this applies to Fumerton’s theory it seems he must deny this other form of access externalism because gaining philosophical assurance regarding the truth of one’s beliefs requires the *ability* to engage in an epistemic ascent

¹⁵ Fumerton (2005), 122.

¹⁶ See Fumerton’s discussion of this point in (2006), 182.

¹⁷ Fumerton (2002), 517.

argument. To be sure, one need not *actually* run an ascent argument to have non-inferential justification but one's non-inferential justification should itself provide the materials for an epistemic ascent argument. As we have seen, though, the problem of very similar truth-makers shows that one cannot engage in this sort of argument to come to know that one has non-inferential justification.

III. The second horn – modify (NIJ)

As Fumerton indicates one may maintain an acquaintance theory of noninferential justification without the claim the acquaintance with the truth-maker of one's belief is necessary. This can be done by requiring only acquaintance with a very similar truth-maker. The view that results is this:

(NIJ*) S has a noninferentially justified belief that p iff S is acquainted with (i) *a fact very similar to the fact that p*, (ii) the thought that p, and (iii) *a relation very similar to the relation of correspondence holding between the fact that p and the thought that p*.¹⁸

Conditions (i) and (iii) permit false beliefs to be noninferentially justified. In order to account for noninferentially justified true beliefs one should understand the fact that p as the limit of similarity and the relation of correspondence as the limit of the relation very similar to the correspondence relation. Condition (iii) requires a different relation than the correspondence relation that figured in (NIJ). A defender of (NIJ*) needs to specify the nature of this relation. I shall not discuss this additional problem.

How plausible is (NIJ*)? An immediate consequence is that the account undermines the emphasis an acquaintance theorist places on the Cartesian method of doubt. Fumerton writes,

¹⁸ See Fumerton (1995), 186. See also p. 3 of this article.

The foundations of knowledge and justified belief are found by following a Cartesian method of doubt. We strip away from our beliefs all that can be in error and what is left will be the foundations upon which we can build through legitimate inference the rest of what we know and justifiably believe.¹⁹

Clearly (NIJ*) does not support this stress on the Cartesian method of doubt.

Another consequence of (NIJ*) is that the acquaintance theorist now faces a problem from the fallibilist challenge. This challenge is to provide a reason for restricting non-inferential justification to features of mental states when that non-inferential justification merely gives one less than unit probability. Again, if at the foundational level we merely have a probability that our beliefs are true, why should we follow the acquaintance theorist in imposing severe demands on what kind of beliefs are noninferentially justified? Fumerton's acquaintance theory restricts noninferential justification to only beliefs about mental states or features of mental states.²⁰ But if these beliefs are merely highly probable why not take on a bit more risk and expand noninferential justification to beliefs about the external world?

Fumerton's reply to this question is interesting. He begins his response by noting that one's justification for believing that (e.g.,) a table is present can be the same in the veridical and non-veridical case but that in the non-veridical case it is implausible that one's belief is noninferentially justified.²¹ The reason this is implausible lies in the fact that in the case of non-veridical experience we lack "any kind of *direct* unproblematic access to the table."²² We should note well that this appears to connect noninferential justification with *direct* unproblematic access. Given that premise it's easy to see why an acquaintance theorist is remiss to allow non-

¹⁹ Fumerton (2005), 121.

²⁰ Fumerton (1995), 79.

²¹ See Fumerton (1995), 184.

²² *Ibid.*

veridical experience to provide noninferential justification for propositions about the external world.

But can the acquaintance theorist that allows for fallible noninferential justification offer the same response? It seems not. Given the argument contained in the discussion of the first horn we lack direct unproblematic access to our own mental states or features of our mental states. So we could have just the same justification for thinking that a red patch is present in a veridical case and a non-veridical case. What is needed is an additional argument to favor an acquaintance theory of noninferential justification over some other theory of noninferential justification that extends the class of basic beliefs to include beliefs about features of the external world.

To the extent that a fallible acquaintance theorist has a reply to these objections it will lie in the idea that the error that is allowed isn't very great. When one is noninferentially justified in believing some false proposition then there is some true proposition that is very similar to the false one. So in some sense one's false belief is approximately true. Moreover, in order to provide strong motivation for the fallible acquaintance theory the view should claim that approximate truth is luminous.²³ Even though one's belief isn't transparently true it is transparent that the belief is approximately true. Let us call this the *marginal error* response.

There are three challenges for this response.

²³ Evan Fales develops a version of the acquaintance theory that explicitly allows for noninferentially justified false beliefs (See Fales (1996), 173). Fales claims that the probabilistic character of fallible noninferential beliefs is given (Ibid., 175). Fales' view, though, seems subject to the following argument. If a noninferential belief has a chance of being wrong then there's a class of skeptical scenarios apropos that belief that one's evidence does not rule out. Consequently one has no non-question begging reason for thinking that one of those skeptical scenarios fails to obtain. Therefore, one has not ended the regress of reasons. Hardcore fallibilists about non-inferential justification are likely to complain that this argument assumes a very strong defeater elimination principle. I assume, however, that an acquaintance view requires a strong defeater elimination principle; apart from some such principle the appeals to transparency and gaining philosophical assurance are rather mysterious. The fallible acquaintance theory I consider in this section avoids this argument by talking about the luminosity of approximate truth.

The first challenge is to work out the metaphysical details. How precisely is the error marginal? This will involve a theory of facts such that two different facts can stand in a relation of close similarity. This may involve getting clear on the constituents of facts and whether different but very similar facts have many of the very same constituents or merely very similar constituents. Moreover, this response involves a theory of the nature of thought and truth such that two thoughts can be very similar to each other and such that one may be close to being true while the other is completely true. This may involve denying the view that belief is a form of digital representation, i.e., non-analog.²⁴ While the details of this view look daunting, the plausibility of the marginal error response lies in a well worked out account.

The second challenge invokes the C.I. Lewis's claim that nothing is probable unless something is certain.²⁵ As Lewis argued if a statement is justified as probable then it must have some ground and if that ground is merely probable then the probability of the original statement is diminished. If in this chain of reasons we never reach a statement with unit probability then Lewis argued the probability of the original statement will fall to whatever value reflects complete ignorance.²⁶ And so unless something is certain nothing is probable.

A curious consequence of the fallible acquaintance view is that it aligns itself with Reichenbach's position in the famous Lewis-Reichenbach debate. This is an unexpected alignment since the theoretical underpinnings of an acquaintance theory are much more in line with C.I. Lewis's commitments than Reichenbach's. This suggests some theoretical instability in a fallible acquaintance theory. The specific issue challenge, though, is to explain where Lewis's argument goes astray in such a way that doesn't lend more plausibility to alternative

²⁴ See Dretske (1981), Chapter 6 for the distinction between digital and analog representation.

²⁵ Lewis (1952).

²⁶ See Lewis (1952), 172. Lewis's argument bears a striking resemblance to that of Hume's in "Of scepticism in regard to reason." *A Treatise of Human Nature* 1.4.1 (see Hume (2000)).

views of noninferential justification that don't carry severe epistemological and metaphysical costs of a fallible acquaintance theory. This is not insignificant since a distinct advantage of Lewis's view was that alternative theories couldn't even account for probable knowledge. So the defender of the fallible acquaintance theory is put in an odd dialectical position of arguing against Lewis on this point while trying to fend off the rivals to Lewis's classical foundationalist view. This might be accomplished but again the devil is in the details.

A third challenge for a fallible acquaintance theory is aimed at the claim that approximate truth is luminous. Recall the main motivation for an acquaintance theory is to provide philosophical assurance concerning the truth of one's beliefs. The fallible acquaintance theorist surrenders this and in its place it substitutes the claim that approximate truth is transparent. However, the argument from intentional possibilities shows that approximate truth is not luminous.

To sharpen this argument consider the revised transparency thesis for (NIJ*):

(TT**) If S is acquainted with (i) *a fact very similar to the fact that p*, (ii) the thought that p, and (iii) *a relation very similar to the relation of correspondence holding between the fact that p and the thought that p* then it is transparent that S's belief that p is approximately true.

The argument against (TT**) is the same argument against (TT*). Suppose the following claims are true: (a) it is impossible to mistake an itch for a pain; (b) one satisfies the conditions of the original (NIJ); (c) one is firmly convinced that one might easily mistake an itch for a pain. If one satisfies the conditions of (NIJ) it follows that one satisfies the conditions of (NIJ*). Recall that the fact that p is the limit of similarity and the relation of correspondence is the limit of the relation very similar to the relation of correspondence. So conditions (i) and (iii) of (NIJ*) are satisfied, and, since condition (ii) is the same in both accounts, all the conditions of (NIJ*) are

met. However given (a) the fact that one is in pain is not very similar to the fact that one has an itch. Since in the original case it is not transparent that one is in pain it follows from that together with the claim that the pain fact and the itch fact are not very similar that it is not transparent that the belief *I'm in pain* is approximately true.

IV. Conclusion

Acquaintance theories of noninferential justification face a troubling dilemma. Unless there are good reasons to think that an acquaintance view can survive this dilemma, the options for non-skeptical epistemological views are diminished. More significantly, the prospects for ending the regress of reasons by direct confrontation with relevant truth-makers appear disheartening.²⁷

²⁷ Acknowledgements

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