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Come in Degrees?**

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Does Epistemic Justification Come in Degrees?

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Abstract

Epistemologists such as Chisholm and Alston believe that the concept of justification as deployed in the classic “JTB” analysis of knowledge is, unlike truth, capable of coming in degrees. This means that we may imagine different degrees of justification which are related to the different levels of evidence that we may have regarding the truth of a belief or a proposition. I object to this view on the grounds that it faces at least two problems. First, it is incompatible with the definition of knowledge as JTB and, second, it conflicts with Alston’s and Chisholm’s own criteria for the justification of beliefs (such as having sufficient or adequate evidence). It seems, further, that these epistemologists have mixed up the “ordinary” application of justification with its “epistemic” application. The concept of justification is capable of degrees in the former sense, but not in the latter.

Key Words: Justification, Epistemic Justification, Degrees, Ordinary Application of Justification, Epistemic Application of Justification

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1.

It seems that many epistemologists who analyze knowledge in terms of justified true belief (JTB) also believe that knowledge is not capable of coming in degrees. On such an account, either we have knowledge of a proposition at a given time, or we have no knowledge of it at all. If knowledge itself is not susceptible of degrees, there is then a strong presumption that none of its elements are either. In particular, “epistemic justification,” as an element of the definition of knowledge, would not come in degrees. Therefore, none of our justified beliefs—given that they are indeed justified—would rank more highly than any others in point of justification. In other words, among the set of epistemic justified beliefs that we possess, none is any more or less justified than any other.

Some epistemologists, however, such as Chisholm (1982) and Alston (1989), claim that the element of justification, unlike truth, is capable of coming in degrees. This means that we may imagine different ranks or degrees of justification, which are (presumably) related to the types or levels of evidence that we have regarding the truth of the proposition in question.

In this regard, Chisholm states:

Of the things that we are justified in believing, some are more justified than others. We may say, more generally, that certain attitudes [or beliefs] are more reasonable on certain occasions than other attitudes [or beliefs] on those occasions. (1982, 4)

And Alston says:

It is a matter of degree. One can be more or less justified in believing that P. (1989, 84)

For two reasons, I do not subscribe to this point of view: First, it is incompatible with the JTB analysis of knowledge—a program of analysis which Chisholm and Alston themselves accept. Second, it is inconsistent with their own criteria for the justification of beliefs (such as having sufficient or adequate evidence, or adequate grounds).

Thus, if we still want to allow that there are degrees of epistemic justification, we have to accept, at the very least, the following two epistemic claims: (1) That a correct definition must allow that knowledge comes in degrees; and (2) that the epistemic notion of justified belief does not import a commitment to a certain degree of justification as being sufficient for knowledge.

As we know, however, these epistemologists do not accept either of these claims. They believe that knowledge is justified true belief, and that a correct definition of knowledge will show that there is only one degree of it. And they also believe that a justified belief is a belief that has a certain, variable degree

of justification, and that that particular degree is the only degree which has sufficient evidence or, adequate evidence, or so forth.

Thus, on the one hand, these epistemologists believe that knowledge is something definite which is not capable of coming in degrees. They define knowledge as JTB, or as something similar such as “evident true belief” (ETB) (Chisholm 1977, 102; 1989, 98). This means that no item of knowledge that one possesses is knowledge more than any other.¹ On the other hand, they believe that justification is capable of coming in degrees. These different positions are inconsistent, because knowledge is nothing but the combination of its elements, and if all or some of its elements are capable of coming in degrees, then knowledge itself has to be capable of coming in degrees. If we are to avoid this conclusion, we have to say that justification is not capable of coming in degrees.

In order to demonstrate this problem with Chisholm’s view, I will show that Chisholm doesn’t seem to accept the possibility of knowledge having degrees; yet he does believe that epistemic justification is capable of coming in degrees!

2.

Chisholm accepts the JTB analysis of knowledge (Chisholm 1957, 16); indeed, one of the epistemologists whom Gettier criticizes in his famous paper “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” (Gettier 1963, 121) is Chisholm himself.

Chisholm tried in his later works to reply to Gettier’s objection. In the process, he shifted from giving an account in terms of “justified belief” to one in terms of “evident belief” (EB), suggesting that the property of being justified in the JTB analysis is simply the same as the property of being evident.² Thus, we can refer to an “ETB”³ analysis in place of the JTB analysis (Chisholm 1977, 102 and 110; 1989, 90 and 98).⁴ However, Chisholm adds that he prefers to use “evident” in place of “justified,” precisely because the notion of being evident, unlike that of being justified, is not capable of coming in degrees (1977, 12).

¹Specifically, Chisholm doesn’t speak of knowledge as being susceptible of degrees. For this reason, he substitutes the notion of being “justified” by the notion of being “evident,” and this because he thinks the notion of being “evident”, unlike that of being “justified”, is not susceptible of degrees (1977, 12).

²He defines ‘evident’ as:

h is evident for s =_{df} (i) h is beyond reasonable doubt for s and (ii) for every i, if accepting i is more reasonable for s than accepting h, then i is certain for s. (1977, 12)

P is evident for S =_{df} For every proposition q, believing p is at least as justified for S as is withholding q. (1989, 11)

³However, Chisholm emphasizes that we have to care about defective evidence, because if a proposition is not defectively evident, then it is justified (h is known by s =_{df} h is accepted by s; h is true; and h is not defectively evident for s (1977, 110)).

⁴Alston has also illustrated this point (1997, 111).

It seems that Chisholm was aware of this problem in the analysis of knowledge. He seems to recognize, on the one hand, that epistemologists tend to believe that knowledge comes in only one degree, and, on the other hand, that they use “justified” in the analysis of knowledge in a sense that does allow it to have degrees. To avoid this problem, there is a need to appeal to elements that are not susceptible of degrees. Accordingly, he asserts that “justified” is not suitable for use in the definition of knowledge, because “*justified*” may also be taken to mean the same as “reasonable” or even “acceptable,” and when it is taken in either of these ways it is not restrictive enough to be adequate for use in the analysis of the traditional conception of knowledge (1977, 102-103). In the third edition of his *Theory of Knowledge*, while he discusses the examples that have been proposed in connection with the Gettier problem, he also emphasizes the following in relation to an example proffered by Goldman:

There is a serious problem with this example. Henry’s true belief that he sees a barn, although it is a justified true belief, is not an evident true belief. His evidence may make it probable for him—indeed, his evidence may even make it beyond reasonable doubt for him—that he sees a barn. But nothing makes it evident for him that he sees a barn. For such a thing to be evident for him, as we have seen in discussing the evidence of senses, Henry would need to have far more evidence than he now has. And if it is not evident to Henry that he sees a barn or that there is a barn there, then Henry does not know that he sees a barn or that there is a barn there. (1989, 93-94)

To resolve the problem, Chisholm thus tries to draw a distinction between a belief’s being “justified” and “evident.” He says the latter is not capable of coming in degrees whereas the former is,¹ and accordingly he proposes his ETB definition of knowledge.

It seems, though, that there are two problems with this proposal. The first is that, from the point of view of being capable or incapable of degrees, there is in fact no difference between the two terms mentioned. What is of interest here is that in Chisholm’s hierarchy (1989, 16) we find at least three degrees of being “evident.” His hierarchy in fact contains six levels overall, of which the last three (four to six) are “evident,” “obvious,” and “certain.” As Chisholm puts it, every proposition that is certain (or obvious) is also one that is evident (1977, 12). This means that there are three degrees of being evident, namely: absolutely evident, obvious, and certain.

¹Therefore, according to his definition of knowledge, where a belief is not evident (where there is some evidence for it but to a degree that is insufficient to render it “evident”) that belief is also not a justified belief, and thus is not a case of knowledge. But according to his view regarding the “hierarchy of epistemic concepts,” beliefs can possess different positive epistemic levels or statuses. Such beliefs are justified epistemically but are not evident. (It is important to pay attention to the use of “justified” in Chisholm’s accounts; he always uses this term in an epistemic sense.)

Based on this, Chisholm's view that being evident does not admit of degrees is incorrect. To resolve this problem, there is no choice but to accept that the "evident" is capable of degrees in the ordinary account of justification, but is not capable of degrees in the epistemic sense, wherein it takes a specific meaning.¹

The second problem is that, if one accepts Chisholm's view that the "evident" is not capable of degrees in the epistemic application of justification, then one has to recognize the same thing as regards the "justified," because that too has a specific meaning in the epistemic sense of the word, and epistemologists, clearly, intend to deploy that latter meaning in epistemology. In this case, the property of being justified would not admit of degrees.

However, it seems that Chisholm has made an assumption about the capacity of justification to come in degrees. This assumption has influenced his preference for using the notion of the "evident" in place of the "justified"; but as we will see in this paper, "epistemic justification," as an element in the definition of knowledge, has to be interpreted in a restrictive manner if it is to be adequate for the analysis of the traditional conception of knowledge. It seems that the epistemologists who equate "K" with "JTB" have had this interpretation of "justified" in mind—that is, an assignment of meaning to "J" such that it can be a ground of knowledge, not the non-epistemic application of the word, which cannot!

As a result, there is no choice but to recognize that "epistemically justified" in the traditional conception of knowledge can be equivalent to "evident," so that if "JB" is the same as "EB", and "EB" (in being evident epistemically) is not capable of coming in degrees, then "JB" (in being justified epistemically) is also not capable of coming in degrees. Therefore Chisholm's attempt to replace "J" by "E" is not successful, because it is not possible to resolve the problem of its capacity to come in degrees except through distinguishing between ordinary and epistemic applications of the term "evident." So, we can retain the term "justified" and distinguish between ordinary and epistemic applications of the term in order to resolve the problem.

3.

Now, let's see what happens if we assume that there is no need for consistency between the capacity of knowledge and the capacity for justification to come in degrees. In other words, let us conjecture that knowledge does not admit of degrees, but, at the same time, that there are degrees of epistemic justification.

¹If Chisholm doesn't accept this point, then he has to accept that "the evident" is capable of coming in degrees in its epistemic application, something that he tries to avoid because in his view it leads to paradox. This is because, on the one hand, he says that the epistemically evident is capable of coming in degrees, but, on the other hand, doesn't recognize that the epistemically evident is capable of coming in degrees in his specific (ETB) definition of knowledge!

It is clear that every technical term in every field of knowledge or science has a meaning that has been determined by the experts in that field. In such cases, common and ordinary usages of the words are not applicable.

Epistemologists propose different criteria for the notion of justification as used in the definition of knowledge. They propose that a belief is justified if there is necessary and sufficient evidence for the belief (Fisher 1995, 20), adequate evidence (Chisholm 1956, 14), adequate ground (Alston 1989, 105-106), a good reason (BonJour 1985, 8; Moser 1985, 4-5), or permission by a right system of J-rules¹ (Goldman 1986, 63) for that belief or for the truth of that belief. Thus epistemologists believe that one is justified in accepting a belief if and only if one has sufficient or adequate evidence, good reason, etc. Then, whenever one does not have, say, sufficient or adequate evidence, although one knows to a certain degree, epistemologists would not consider it knowledge per se.

The question then arises of when it can be said that one has “adequate evidence,” “sufficient evidence,” or permission by a “right system of J-rules” to believe a proposition. Appealing to Chisholm’s terms: Does the evidence provide for certainty regarding the proposition, or does it provide for the proposition to be evident, or to have some other kind of property from the lower ranges of his hierarchy?

According to Chisholm, if one’s evidence is sufficient for one to have an “evident belief,” then one has adequate evidence.

This is once again inconsistent with the idea that epistemic justification is capable of coming in degrees. If we are going to have knowledge, we must have justification, and possessing the latter implies having adequate evidence, good reason, or etc. Then, if there is adequate evidence, there is knowledge (JB); and if there is not, there is no knowledge.

4.

It is not in fact all that important what is adequate or sufficient evidence, or what is a right system of J-rules. Regardless of what one considers adequate or sufficient evidence to be (whether something that gives us a certain belief, an evident belief, or anything lower, such as “beyond (reasonable) doubt” belief), one could accept any of them, but none could be the ground of the capacity of justified belief to come in degrees. Therefore, one can take any degree as being an adequate or sufficient degree for knowledge. The only important thing here is whether or not one has adequate evidence. For example, if one believes that adequate evidence is something that grounds a beyond (reasonable) doubt belief, then, if one has evidence sufficient to engender such a belief, one has “JB” (K); and if one does not have this evidence, then one does not. So, all of one’s beliefs that are beyond (reasonable) doubt will be classed as one’s justified beliefs, and thus as one’s knowledge. And there is no

¹If he regards it as a criterion for justification at all.

difference between one's justified beliefs, in respect of the fact that they are *epistemic* justified beliefs: none of them is more justified than any other—or, in other words, none of them is “knowledge” any more than any other!

Although it is possible that justified beliefs have different degrees of possibility of truth, this gradation of belief does not, however, affect the validity of the knowledge in question. Moreover, these different degrees do not place any of the epistemic justified beliefs higher than the others. For example, if beyond (reasonable) doubt beliefs are beliefs which are justified, then, if some beliefs carry higher degrees of possibility, such as certainty or the property of being evident, these higher degrees do not influence their justification. This is because these beliefs are justified as soon as they are beyond (reasonable) doubt, and their being certain or evident does not play any further role in their epistemic justification.

The exception, though, is where one's knowledge is based on adequate evidence, and one believes that adequate evidence is something that causes certainty or evident belief. In that case, only when one has certainty or evident belief does one have knowledge. In other words, knowledge is gained only after acquiring certainty or evident belief. This implies that if one had a beyond (reasonable) doubt belief, one would not yet have a justified belief and would therefore have no knowledge of that belief.

Furthermore, from this perspective, self-presenting and axiomatic beliefs are not ranked higher than any other epistemic justified belief. However, such beliefs are better for us, because they do not require any prior propositions or otherwise for their justification.

Also, we know that a certain belief is an “evident belief,” too. Therefore, as an evident belief, it is no different than any other evident belief. This is due to the fact that knowledge is defined as an evident belief, and as nothing more. And no evident belief is more evident than any other. Thus, as Chisholm states, the property of being “evident” is not capable of coming in degrees. So if we can imagine that a belief held with certainty is more evident than an evident belief, it is in reality just an ordinary application and not the epistemic application of the concept of justification.

5.

It seems reasonable to conclude that, epistemologically, the concept of being justified, like that of truth, is not capable of coming in degrees. In ordinary language we do commonly say that a given attitude or belief may be more reasonable or justified than another. This application of justification is very natural since, in ordinary language, one also speaks of knowing different things to different degrees of knowledge. Thus, some items of knowledge can possess higher and some lower degrees of evidence. Nevertheless, it is important not to fall into the trap of seeing the ordinary application of justification as interchangeable with the epistemic application. This is because

the concept of justification is capable of coming in degrees only in its non-epistemic sense, and not in the epistemic sense¹.

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¹It seems that my idea here about concept of epistemic justification also may be true in relation to concept of epistemic belief. And what epistemologists who discussed about distinguishing between epistemology of belief and epistemology of degrees of belief have stated (see: F. Hubert and C. Schmidt-Petri (2009), especially "Beliefs, Degrees of Belief, and the Lockean Thesis" Richard Foley and "The Lockean Thesis and the Logic of Belief" James Hawthorne) does not relate to my opinion here. Therefore, I think in the case of beliefs there is no uncontroversial proposed accounts of all-out beliefs (which do not come in degrees) in terms of graded beliefs. A critic, however, may object this view and believe that the literature on acceptances and the Lockean thesis provides clear examples of how to defined all-out concepts only in terms of graded ones. It seems that these epistemologists (such as Foley, 2009; Huber, 2009; and Frankish, 2009) did not aim to analyze all-out notions only in terms of graded ones. But if they were going to go this way, It seems to me that this kind of analyzing does not work. There is, clearly, something inconsistent in trying to analyze all-out concepts on the basis of graded ones; because we talk about real analysis of notion not just lexical of it and if so, then, how can one imagine to analyze something just in terms of a certain degree of it? When one mentioned in analysis of a concept just a certain grade of it, one, in fact, did say nothing just re-mentioning the word by a certain degree of it, while in definition of something we are logically going to know something by something different which cost more than this rate. And the same arguments which are provided here for the justification also can be used for the belief just with a little bit change. Yes, still the concept of belief, like the concept of justificatiuon, is capable of coming in degrees only in its non-epistemic sense, and not in the epistemic sense.