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## **KNOWLEDGE AND JUSTIFICATION: RESPONSE TO WALTER CARNIELLI**

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**Abstract:** Walter Carnielli argues that my position about knowledge and justification emphasizes individual knowledge, is too demanding, and is anti-psychologistic. In my response I argue that this reflects a misunderstanding of the view of knowledge and justification sketched in my book, and that our views on these issues are much closer than he imagines.

**Keywords:** Knowledge. Belief. Justification.

## **CONHECIMENTO E JUSTIFICAÇÃO: RÉPLICA À WALTER CARNIELLI**

**Resumo:** Walter Carnielli argumenta que minha posição com respeito ao conhecimento e à justificação enfatiza o conhecimento individual, é demasiadamente exigente e é anti-psicologista. Em minha réplica argumento que isto reflete um mal entendido em relação ao ponto de vista sobre conhecimento e justificação esboçado em meu livro, e que nossas visões dessas questões são muito mais próximas do que ele imagina.

**Palavras chave:** Conhecimento. Crença. Justificação.

Walter views my position about knowledge and justification as emphasizing individual knowledge, being too demanding, and being anti-psychologistic—suggesting a contrast with Dretske’s information-theoretic account and with social choice theory. This reflects a misunderstanding of the view of knowledge and justification sketched in my book; in fact, I think our positions on these issues are much closer than he imagines.

## 1. JUSTIFICATION

In my book I characterize knowledge as justified truth, and place four main constraints on the notion of justification: structural, psychological, social, and ontological. Walter says that my constraints make justifications “akin to a mathematical proof,” and argues (p. 514):

Is this not too much? I think it is: ontological relevance, in the explicit sense Chateaubriand requires, may be excessively demanding when combined with syntactical structure, convincingness and social acceptability. An ontological constraint for knowledge, for instance, is that what is known must be true, but what is required, in general, is much more than this: the ontological relevance must guarantee the movement from premises to conclusions, and if the ontological constraint were not satisfied, no knowledge would be achieved. This is barely attainable even in mathematical practice, where proofs are done diagrammatically or analogically ...

Although I do derive the four constraints from my examination of the notion of proof, the idea is not to make justification in general like mathematical proof in a strict sense of ‘proof’. On the contrary, I take the notion of proof to be broader than mathematical and logical proofs, and use criminal trial proofs as an example. I recall briefly the motivation for each constraint.

The structural constraint is simply that justifications must have a structure, which can be simple or complex. I give several examples of such structures, as based on authority, memory, etc. So, when Walter talks about the requirement of a “syntactical structure” as one of the reasons for my characterization being too demanding, he must be interpreting “syntactical structure” in a much stronger sense, akin to the structure of formal proofs, which is not what I intended.

The psychological constraint was also rather loosely formulated as a requirement that justifications must be convincing to the individuals to whom they are directed. I explicitly mention that the degree of conviction is quite variable, depending on the character of the justification.

The social constraint relativizes the justification to specific social groups whose members know the rules of the game and are capable of deciding on the worthiness of the justification.

The ontological constraint, finally, is not meant to require a step-by-step preservation of truth as in a formal proof. The point is rather that a justification may be convincing and yet be faulty for several different reasons, one of which may be that it involves a correct inference depending on false premises. The example of the rabbit in the field was a case in point; I infer there is a rabbit in the field from the premise that I see a rabbit in the field, but what I actually see is a rock, not a rabbit. As an instance of the ontological constraint I concluded from this (pp. 355-356):

The justification should not just *seem* to be a good justification; it must *be* a good justification. It is the difference, once again, between psychology and epistemology.

And a little later on the page I make the remark—quoted by Walter—that the notion of justification should not be treated as a psychological notion.

In view of these remarks Walter suggests (p. 514) that my account of justification is influenced by Frege's anti-psychologism. I disagree; what I am arguing is that just as seeming to be true is not the same as being true, seeming to justify is not the same as justifying. We may be convinced that something is a good justification and yet be wrong, because the justification is flawed. The conclusion I drew is that justification cannot be treated as a form of psychological conviction, but must answer to an external constraint of correctness. This is quite obvious for mathematical proofs, and I am simply extending it to justification in general.

## 2. KNOWLEDGE AS JUSTIFIED TRUTH

As part of his discussion of justification, Walter suggests (p. 515) that my account of knowledge is directed to a "lonely knower", and that I do not take into account "multi-agent knowledge and group interaction." Again, this is a misunderstanding, because one of the main motivations for characterizing knowledge as justified truth was precisely to dissociate knowledge from the justified true belief of an individual knower.

Of course, individuals do have specific knowledge of many facts, but knowledge in general is not the knowledge of an individual, or even of the totality of individuals. We speak of mathematical knowledge, for instance, not as the knowledge of this or that person, but as knowledge that has been legitimized through a process of justification by the mathematical community—and similarly for other kinds of knowledge. An individual may even have knowledge without knowing an "intrinsic" justification, because we often acquire knowledge by looking things up in trustworthy sources. Thus, as I discuss at some length in several

chapters, my account is not directed to a “lonely knower”, but is a socially directed account of knowledge.

Walter also suggests that my reference to “the tyranny of belief” is due to a distinction between a religious (or quasi-religious) form of belief, and a rational (doxastic) form of belief. Thus, he says in note 2:

Chateaubriand seems to be echoing here a distinction between strong belief and weak belief. To weakly believe something is to be rationally (or doxastically) committed to its being highly probable, while to strongly believe something is to be vitally committed to it. So we are prepared to give up a weak or a theoretical belief, but not a strong one. So someone may be prepared to revise his/her belief that the dollar will fall against the euro tomorrow, but not his/her belief in life after death—at least not so easily.

But this was not the point I was making. Our rational opinions may be weaker or stronger, according to the evidence, but they need not involve belief, in any sense of ‘belief’ that goes beyond having adequate evidence.<sup>1</sup> I do not have to believe in abstract properties in order to hold that there are abstract properties. That is the reason for my complaint on p. 442 about philosophers who decide to embrace nominalism, or naturalism, or some other philosophical position, because they cannot get themselves to *believe in* abstract entities, or in mental entities, or whatever.

## REFERENCES

LEHRER, K. *Theory of Knowledge*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000.

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<sup>1</sup> In this sense, I would prefer to use the notion of *acceptance*, as developed by Keith Lehrer in his *Theory of Knowledge*.