THE FIXATION OF KNOWLEDGE
AND THE QUESTION-ANSWER PROCESS OF INQUIRY

Claudine TIERCELIN
Institut Universitaire de France
Université Paris XII, Institut Jean Nicod

Summary
The aim of the paper is to present some important insights of C. Hookway’s pragmatist analysis of knowledge viewed less in the standard (Gettier) way, as justified true belief, than as a dynamic natural and normative question-answer process of inquiry, a reliable and successful agent-based enterprise, consisting in virtuous dispositions explaining how we can be held responsible for our beliefs and investigations. Despite the merits of such an approach, the paper shows that it may be inefficient in accounting for some challenges posed by scepticism or by the nature of epistemic normativity. In which case it might be premature to propose it as a new conception of knowledge against the standard one and worth considering a different, though still pragmatist, strategy, in which inquiry would aim at the fixation of knowledge, still viewed as justified true beliefs, i.e critical commonsensical, warrantedly assertible, intellectual and sentimental dispositions for which the epistemic agent, viewed less as an individual person than as a scientific community of inquirers, should be taken as a knowing and reliable agent, both answerable and responsible for her assertions.

1. Introduction

C. Hookway’s conception of knowledge retains many pragmatist insights and develops itself as an original basically virtue-theoretic strategy, viewing knowledge not so much as a justified true belief enterprise, but rather as a question-answer process of inquiry in which the regulation of our affective states is part and parcel of our theoretical deliberation, stating the right limits to be imposed both on our reasons to doubt and on our justifications for believing, thus setting the rules of our practice of epistemic evaluation. Despite the merits of Hookway’s approach, one may doubt
its capacity to justify such a change in our standard view of knowledge, and in particular, to overcome the threat of scepticism, as may be shown from other pragmatist strategies concerning the nature of assertion, of inquiry, or the position to adopt towards doubt. This is why it might be worth suggesting a different, though still pragmatist, strategy in which the fixation of knowledge would rather be taken as the aim of inquiry, and knowledge itself defined in terms of basically commonsensical and critical (justified), warrantedly assertible (true) intellectual and sentimental dispositions and assertions (beliefs) for which the epistemic agent, viewed less as an individual reliable person than as a collective agent, or scientific community of inquirers, should be held both answerable, in so far as her cognitive abilities are less rule-governed than fixed by the constraints of the real, and responsible, since, even if she cannot control the whole of her epistemic evaluations, she should still be able to control and criticize the methods she is using, and be strongly committed to her assertions, in order to receive credit for them, and be viewed not only as a virtuous inquirer but as a knowing and reliable agent.

2. C. Hookway's conception of knowledge as a question-answer process of inquiry

From his 1990 book on Scepticism to his latest writings, C. Hookway has kept underlining that “the focus of our ‘epistemic lives’ is the activity of inquiry: we attempt to find things out, to extend our knowledge by carrying out investigations directed at answering questions, and to refine our knowledge by considering questions about things we currently hold to be true” (1994, 211). Without being a “full-blooded virtue epistemologist”, Hookway stresses that the main concern of epistemology should not be with improving a Gettier-type definition of knowledge as justified true belief, but rather “with explaining the evaluations we must be able to make if we carry out inquiries in a responsible, self-controlled fashion” (1994, 212). For “we don’t understand a concept like justification until we grasp its role in evaluations employed in ‘ordering’ or regulating inquiries, and we have no need for a theory of justification until it is required to explain these evaluations” (ibid.). Indeed, a fundamental problem for epistemology concerns how it is possible for us to carry out the investigations required for effective and responsible inquiry, and this is threatened by the possibility of scepticism, as Hookway noted in his 1990 book on Scepticism, namely