ENTITLEMENT AND PUBLIC ACCESSIBILITY OF EPISTEMIC STATUS

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Summary
In recent epistemological literature, epistemic entitlement is understood as a personal epistemic status that does not require elaborate justificatory activity on behalf of the entitled individual. It is nevertheless internalist in a weaker sense, since it is said to be grounded in perceptual experiences.

It seems, however, that the conditions under which an epistemic right holds should, like in cases of most other rights, be publicly observable, because they have implications for the ways others are required to treat the entitled individual. Therefore I suggest an alternative to the weakly internalist conception of epistemic entitlement as based on mental episodes. I show how we can construe epistemic rights as being based on external conditions that are publicly observable. This social externalist approach is then defended against internalist and externalist challenges.

Two broad classes of epistemic status concepts have dominated the epistemological debate until recently. On the one hand we have somewhat deontological notions such as justification and reason that stem from an internalist tradition. These are intimately connected to agentive rationality. On the other hand we have more abstract notions such as warrant and safety that have been introduced by externalist minded epistemologists.

1. Precursors of this paper have been presented at the Conference “Defeasibility in Epistemology, Ethics, Law and Logic” in Frankfurt, at the research Colloquium in Fribourg (Switzerland) and at the 22nd Congress of the DGPhil in Munich. I would like to thank the audiences for many helpful remarks, particularly Klemens Kappel, Gianfranco Soldati, Cain Todd and Michael Williams. I am also grateful to Fred Dretske and an anonymous referee for Grazer Philosophische Studien for voicing important criticism. My special thank goes to my collaborators in the DFG-funded research project “Defeasibility and Discourse Dependence” Claudia Blöser, Claudia Cuadra, Mikael Janvid and Marcus Willaschek, whose influence on the development of my thoughts was invaluable.
logists. They immediately concern the relation between a belief and its truth.

In the last two decades, the concept of epistemic entitlement has gained some attention in the epistemological literature, notably in attempts to explain perceptual knowledge. The idea that the central epistemic notion is one of an epistemic right seems initially attractive if one looks for a position in between the two camps, because it can accommodate externalist and internalist intuitions: We may sometimes be entitled to a certain belief independently of our ability to offer a justification, whereas special circumstances may require us to give reasons in order to be entitled. Authors such as Fred Dretske, Tyler Burge, Peter Graham, Christopher Peacocke, Crispin Wright and Martin Davies have offered original accounts of entitlement as a kind of epistemic status that comes with weaker internalist requirements than justification. Although these accounts differ in important respects, it is nevertheless possible to extract something like a common core, a “standard account” of epistemic entitlement.

Having summarized the standard account in section 1, I will argue (in section 2) that epistemic entitlements—just as other kinds of rights—should meet an accessibility requirement: since someone’s having a right to do something has consequences for how others are required to treat that person, entitlements have to be publicly accessible. After showing (in section 3) that entitlements as understood in the standard account have problems meeting this requirement, I present a social externalist alternative in section 4, according to which entitlements are grounded in a set of accepted default conditions. In sections 5 and 6 I discuss ways in which this account can deal with various objections driven by internalist intuitions.

1. The standard account of epistemic entitlement

Here is what I take to be the four central elements of the standard account of epistemic entitlement.³


3. In extracting the standard account I am putting weight on commonalities between the authors. Not all four theses I am putting forward are shared by all authors. Wright and Davies, e.g., are not talking about entitlements for specific perceptual beliefs, but are rather interested in a conception of entitlement that helps to set sceptical worries at rest. Peter Graham does not commit himself to the weakly internalist aspect of entitlement (namely, to the idea that entitlement somehow grounds in perceptual experience), and so on. But since these deviations are the