

THE CASE OF PATIENT SMITH: PAIN-BELIEF, EPISTEMIC LUCK, AND ACQUAINTANCE

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ABSTRACT: Can a pain-belief such as “I feel pain” be fallibly justified and luckily true? In this discussion note, I provide a Gettier-type example to show that a belief about one’s own pain can be held on fallible justification and a matter of epistemic luck for its believer. This example underscores the significance of introspection and direct awareness in such epistemic situations. Moreover, perhaps surprisingly, the example suggests that one can, at the same time and with regard to the same body part, though in different respects, both know and not know ‘I feel pain.’ The knowledge is possessed in terms of acquaintance; the lack of knowledge is explainable in terms of non-introspective justification.

KEYWORDS: justification, fallibility, infallibility, epistemic certainty,
epistemic luck, acquaintance

Introduction

Consider the claim: “I feel pain.” This sort of statement appears paradigmatic as an assertion that, when believed by its assertor, is epistemically certain for the assertor and thus infallible. For instance, Klein (1984, 124) discusses a passage from Firth in which the latter presents “I am in pain” as an example of a claim that is epistemically certain in the “strong sense,” as opposed to the “weak sense” he also addresses. Chisholm (1989, 19) speaks of self-presenting properties as being a source of certainty, and necessarily so (1979, 25). He provides the example of *my feeling depressed* as a paradigm case of a self-presenting state (1979, 25) and, therefore, a matter of certainty. If *my feeling depressed* is a paradigm case of a self-presenting state, then arguably, *my feeling pain* is, too.

The apparently infallible nature of such pain-beliefs seems to make them Gettier-proof and beyond the reach of epistemic luck, or so one might reasonably hold. It is plausible that, in most cases, beliefs of this kind are epistemically certain for their possessors. In what follows, I will propose a counterexample to the thesis that such propositions must be epistemically certain and hence free from the threat of epistemic luck, thereby suggesting that they can be fallibly justified and luckily

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true for their believers. This counterexample highlights a strong candidate concerning what it is about such propositions that, when believed, make them infallible if they are.

Preliminary Information

In *“That’s not my arm”: a hypnotic analogue of somatoparaphrenia*, Rahmanovic, *et al.* (2012) discuss their clinical use of hypnosis to generate a case of somatoparaphrenia, which is the delusional belief that one’s own limb does not belong to one’s body. Suppose *arguendo* that a neuropsychologist were to use a similar application of hypnosis to engender in a patient the delusional belief that the patient feels pain in a limb that belongs to his body. Such a state of affairs seems possible, or at least imaginable, given the use of hypnosis to bring about somatoparaphrenia. If such a false-pain case were to occur—say, via techniques like hypnosis and memory implantation, then the patient’s belief would be false and therefore not infallible. This sort of situation can be filled out with additional details of epistemological interest to address themes such as justification, epistemic luck, and introspection. I will present such a case below.

The Case of Patient Smith

I will call the patient ‘Smith.’ Suppose that Smith is working with a neuropsychologist to overcome a severe bout of hypochondria. Smith is having difficulty accepting the possibility that one’s beliefs about one’s physical health might be false. To demonstrate that, in some circumstances, patients might be wrong about their health concerns, the neuropsychologist decides upon a project to use hypnosis in an effort to generate Smith’s false belief that he feels pain in his right foot. Moreover, the neuropsychologist supplements the hypnotic treatment with counterfeit but credible evidence that Smith is in pain. This evidence includes (a) fake video and audio footage of Smith claiming a moment ago that he felt pain in his right foot, and (b) non-veridical memories of Smith declaring a moment ago that he felt pain in his foot—memories that were inserted by the neuropsychologist, who used a sophisticated and rapid version of the method of memory implantation. The neuropsychologist did not inform Smith of the project, and Smith did not consent to it.¹

¹ For the sake of argument, let us ignore the problematic ethical features of this story, and let us assume that there is a form of memory implantation sufficient to enable the neuropsychologist to complete the project, which is intended as a therapy for valetudinarianism. Let us also grant that there is a way for the neuropsychologist to create the fake footage, perhaps via some application of artificial intelligence.

The project is nearly successful. Smith believes that he feels pain in his right foot. Smith accepts this proposition based on the false but credible evidence of (a) and (b) manufactured by the neuropsychologist. And, let us stipulate, Smith is justified in believing so because the evidence, though spurious, is credible given his epistemic situation. However, there is a snag to the story. It seems that Smith's belief is not false after all.

At the moment Smith forms the belief that he feels pain in his right foot, the neuropsychologist's assistant accidentally drops a heavy object—say, a large, solid, 20 lb. flower vase—on Smith's right foot. Smith is sitting in a chair and is blindfolded so that he cannot see the vase smashing into his foot. The impact is sufficient to cause pain in Smith's foot, which he feels. Nevertheless, Smith's formulation of the (true) belief 'I feel pain' is not based on the impingement nor the phenomenological quality of his felt pain, but instead on the hypnosis and the fallible justification fabricated by the neuropsychologist.

Smith's case appears to demonstrate that he has a fallibly justified, luckily true belief that he feels pain in his foot. His belief is caused by hypnosis. His justification rests on fake footage and false memories. Though fallible, the evidence is credible for Smith given his epistemic situation and, as we have stipulated, sufficient to warrant his belief. Furthermore, the proposition "Smith feels pain" is true, but luckily so for Smith and unpredictably so for the neuropsychologist, since the proposition is made true by the accidental and unlikely crashing of the vase on Smith's foot. Had the vase not fallen on the foot, "Smith feels pain" would have been false.

Introspection and Justification

What does Smith's case indicate about the kind of epistemic certainty we often possess concerning beliefs such as "I feel pain"? Plausibly, the case suggests that the decisive factor regarding such beliefs, i.e., the aspect of the epistemic situation that makes the beliefs epistemically certain and infallible for the believer whenever they are so, is not merely that these beliefs are about our introspectively accessible states of pain, nor does the factor concern only the truth value of these beliefs. Rather, the decisive factor seems to concern the justificatory status of such propositions: our beliefs that such propositions are true are held on the justificatory basis of acquaintance via introspection. The introspection enables direct awareness of one's mental states; such awareness provides indefeasible justification that one is experiencing those states; sans such awareness, one's justification seems defeasible.

Smith's justified and luckily true belief that he feels pain is held on the grounds of non-introspective evidence: that is, the sham footage and memories

concocted by the neuropsychologist. This evidence is defeasible. Had Smith become aware of the neuropsychologist's project, the proposition "The neuropsychologist is deceiving me" would have defeated the evidence of the footage and memories. However, had Smith believed 'I feel pain' based on the directly accessible quality of his felt pain given the event of the falling vase, it is plausible that his belief would have been infallible and hence indefeasible and beyond the reach of epistemic luck.

Climenhaga (2023, Section I) discusses direct acquaintance or immediate awareness of being in pain, using the term 'apprehension' to refer to the mental state of direct awareness of oneself, one's own pain, and the relation between them. Applying the term to Smith's case, although he has a justified true belief that he feels pain, the truth of his belief is a matter of epistemic happenstance. His justification is fallible because it is not formed via apprehension. Had Smith apprehended the non-present pain he believed he had, which he could not have done because that pain was non-existent *given the neuropsychologist's project*, then his belief about that pain would have been infallible.

Does Smith Know That He Feels Pain?

If it ain't so, you don't know. In other words, knowledge is factive: knowledge that *p* entails that *p* is true. The reverse, however, is not the case. True propositions are not, therefore, known propositions. Smith has a true belief that he feels pain in his right foot. And yet, in an important sense, the belief is luckily true for Smith and thus not known by him. But in another sense, the belief is an item of knowledge for Smith, or at least potentially so.

Notice that Smith believes "I feel pain in my right foot" because the neuropsychologist hypnotized him to believe so and provided fallible evidence to support that belief. However, at the moment of formulating the belief "I feel pain in my right foot," the vase slammed into his right foot, and he *felt it*. Felt pain is known pain. As Bob Marley put it in *Running Away* (1978), "who feels it, knows it." This general point suggests that Smith is immediately acquainted with his felt pain and, thus, that he is doubly justified to believe: "I feel pain in my right foot." Given the hypnosis and contrived evidence, he has defeasible and fallible justification for the true belief "I feel pain in my right foot." With respect to this justification, he does not know that he feels pain. Nevertheless, given the accident with the vase, he has indefeasible and infallible justification, and therefore knowledge, regarding the true belief "I feel pain in my right foot"—as long as he attends to his experience and forms his belief on its basis.

Since Smith feels the pain of the vase hitting his foot, he is directly acquainted with that pain. But he lacks acquaintance with the pain he believes that he feels

concerning the circumstances of the hypnosis and implanted memories. He is aware of the real pain, but not the ersatz pain. This point suggests that *belief that one feels pain* is infallible iff based on the self-presenting (and thus epistemically certain) property of felt pain, properly apprehended. According to Chisholm (1989, 19), “if the property of being F is self-presenting, if S is F, and if S believes himself to be F, then it is certain for S that he is F.” However, fallibly justified *belief that one feels pain* can rest on non-introspective evidence which therefore lacks self-presenting properties and cannot be introspectively apprehended. It seems, oddly enough, that one can be in both states at once with respect to the same proposition-type but concerning different sources of justification.

Notice that the ‘I’ in “I feel pain in my right foot” is an indexical which refers to the same person, Smith, regarding that proposition as it concerns (i) Smith’s believing it with respect to the hypnosis and as it concerns (ii) Smith’s believing it with respect to the vase striking his foot. An important question arises as to whether “I feel pain in my right foot,” which is believed by Smith, is the same proposition-token in both (i) and (ii). If so, it seems that Smith both knows and does not know the same proposition-token at the same time, but in different respects—one infallible and the other fallible. If not, then Smith knows one proposition-token “I feel pain in my right foot” and at the same time does not know *another* proposition-token “I feel pain in my right foot,” although he is justified (to different degrees) in believing both tokens.

Conclusion

In this discussion note, I have provided a Gettier-type example to show that a belief about one’s pain can be held on fallible justification and luckily true. This example underscores the significance of introspection and awareness in such epistemic situations, indicating that it is the immediate awareness of pain that makes the belief “I feel pain” infallible and that it is possible to form that belief on non-introspective and defeasible grounds that are consequently independent of the mental state of acquaintance. Moreover, perhaps surprisingly, it seems that one can, at the same time and with regard to the same body part, though in different respects, both know and not know “I feel pain.” The knowledge is infallible and possessed in terms of acquaintance, while the lack of knowledge is explainable in terms of non-introspective and fallible justification.

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