

PRIVILEGED ACCESS AND QUALIA

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Abstract

In this paper I shall examine some recent literature that purports to show that sensations or qualia are not real psychological phenomena, and that we do not have privileged access to our psychological states. In particular, I shall criticize some work by Daniel C. Dennett, who has argued against the existence of qualia and privileged access to the mental. I will maintain that Dennett has not made a convincing case for eliminating qualia, and has not shown that we do not have privileged access to psychological phenomena from a first-person point of view.

Keywords: Qualia, Privileged Access, Self-Warranting Knowledge

Introduction

I will defend the view that certain criticisms of what has been called self-justifying or self-warranting knowledge of our psychological states have not succeeded. I will do this by arguing that attempts by Dennett and others to undermine self-justifying knowledge are unsuccessful. I begin by examining a paper by Dennett where he attempts to eliminate qualia.

In a notable paper called "Quining Qualia," Dennett explains that he uses the verb 'to quine' in honor of W. V. O. Quine. It means to deny resolutely the existence or importance of something seemingly real and significant, for example, the soul. Quining qualia means saying there is no such thing as qualia. Dennett says "Qualia" is an unfamiliar term for something that could not be more familiar to each of us: the way things seem to us. (Dennett, 1990, 519) They are 'properties of conscious experience' such as the way milk looks to you or tastes to you.

Different authors use the term 'qualia' in different ways. I use it to identify properties of mental states by what it is like to have them. Such mental states include traditional secondary qualities such as the smell of a rose, the taste of pineapple, or the redness of a tomato. If a being is conscious, there is something that it is like to be that being, to use a phrase made famous by Thomas Nagel. A mental state is conscious if there is something it is like to be in that mental state. Put another way, a mental state

is phenomenally conscious if it has a qualitative feel; an associated quality of experience, or just qualia for short. The mind-body problem is partly the problem of explaining these phenomenal qualities of consciousness.

Discussion

Dennett attacks a special conception of qualia. He says he does not deny the reality of conscious experience, and he grants that conscious experience has properties. He only wants to deny that conscious experience has the properties in the special way that philosophers have described qualia. What is this special way? Dennett wants to deny the existence of anything having the following properties: ineffable, intrinsic, atomic and unanalyzable, simple and homogeneous, essentially private, or essentially directly or immediately apprehensible to consciousness. He rejects such concepts as ‘immediate phenomenal qualities’ or ‘phenomenal properties,’ terms that some philosophers use which Dennett thinks are terribly unclear.

Dennett argues by using what he calls ‘intuition pumps’, fifteen of them in all. In his first intuition pump he talks about a clear way in which people believe there are qualia. He says my first sip of orange juice at breakfast tastes much sweeter than my second sip when interrupted by pancakes and maple syrup, but that after a swallow or two of some coffee, the orange juice tastes sweet again the way it did the first sip. {Dennett, 1990, 521) This seems to be a paradigm case of having or experiencing qualia in a way that no one else experiences the qualia I am experiencing. I seem to know, in a special or superior sort of way that the sweet taste of the orange juice after tasting the coffee is similar to the first sip. Dennett says it is all right to talk about the way the juice tastes to me at time t.

What I want to concentrate on is his arguments that we can make mistakes about qualia. He presents an intuition pump called ‘Chase and Sanborn’:

“Once upon a time there were two coffee-tasters Mr. Chase and Mr. Sanborn...One day...Chase ...confessed to Sanborn: ‘I hate to admit it...When I came to Maxwell House six years ago, I thought Maxwell House was the best tasting coffee in the world...I no longer like it. My tastes have changed. I’ve become a more sophisticated coffee drinker. I no longer like that taste at all’. Sanborn greeted this revelation with considerable interest. ‘It’s funny you should mention it, he replied for something rather similar happened to me...but my tastes haven’t changed ; my...tasters have changed.’” (Dennett, 1990, 526, 527)

Dennett says there are the following possibilities: For Chase, (a) his coffee-taste-qualia have stayed constant, while his reactive attitudes to those qualia...have shifted; (b) he “is simply wrong about the constancy of his qualia; they have shifted gradually and imperceptibly over the years, while

his standards of taste have not budged”; (c) his “qualia have shifted some and his standards of judgment have also slipped”. For Sanborn, (a) “his qualia have shifted, due to some sort of derangement in his perceptual machinery”, while his aesthetic standards have stayed the same; (b) his standards have shifted, Sanborn simply misremembers his past experiences; (c) as with Chase, there is some qualia shifting and some change in aesthetic standards. (Dennett, 1990, 527, 528)

Dennett is denying that there are these three possibilities, but says that the qualia realist is saddled with them. Dennett’s point is that the alleged distinctions among these three possibilities is empirically unsupportable. These distinctions, according to Dennett, cannot be found in experimental psychology or in any neuroscience. As a referee has pointed to me, he denies that first- person reports will defend privileged access defenders.

The trouble with this line of argument is that there may really have been such a change in qualia over the years, or such a change in one’s standards of taste. I cannot actually remember much of anything that happened to me six years ago, much less whether something tasted differently to me then than it does now. But that has little to do with reality. If my taste buds or my qualia have changed over the years, I may not be aware of it. It does not follow that it did not happen just because it is unverifiable. Consider an analogous case. I may have forgotten something that only I witnessed six years ago, but it does not follow that I did not have the requisite belief six years ago. I have forgotten the belief, and only I could verify it, yet there is a fact of the matter independent of its verifiability.

Dennett has no further argument against the qualia realist here other than to say it is impossible to tell what happened to Chase and Sanborn. I think he begs the question against realism at this point, once we have given some counterexamples to his verificationism. The realist can say that it doesn’t matter whether qualia differences are verifiable. There are any number of unverifiable qualia experiences which an agent has forgotten and no one can ever tell that she had. Some of them are unverifiable in principle, but why should we say that they did not occur? I may have forgotten that I use to love cocoa, and no one else knew about it either. This is still a fact about my past, even if it is unverifiable.

I think that Dennett must say that the Chase and Sanborn example is one that is unverifiable in principle. But one can imagine a case where we trace the development of a person’s taste buds, and notice that hot coffee changed the taste receptors over time so that she no longer likes the taste of Maxwell House. We may not possess the wherewithal to do this currently, but it seems rash to say that this is impossible in principle.

Dennett would say that no matter how we research the history of Chase and Sanborn, there will always be at least two rival hypotheses that

explain the phenomena, and the choice between them is undecidable in principle. Yet this seems to be the situation in many of the social sciences, but we do not assume that there is no fact of the matter in such cases. We don't know what Franklin Roosevelt's real motives were during the Pearl Harbor attack. He could have intentionally overlooked it to get us into the war, or he could have used poor judgment in predicting what the Japanese would do. For all that, we think there is a fact of the matter even though the matter is undecidable on the available evidence. Quine is famous for saying that even when we have all the facts there will be alternative explanations of those facts.

A referee told me that in *Consciousness Explained*, Dennett says: "...this is metaphysically dubious, because it creates the bizarre category of the objectively subjective-the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don't seem to seem that way to you!...Some thinkers have their faces so hard against "verificationism" and "operationalism" that they want to deny it even in the one arena where it makes manifest good sense: the realm of subjectivity...We might classify (my) model, then, as *first-person operationalism*, for it brusquely denies the possibility in the principle of consciousness of a stimulus in the absence of the subject's belief in that consciousness." (Dennett, 1991, 132)

I think it is worth pointing out that Dennett seems to be flying in the face of a robust commonsense here. I have queried several of my friends who have had no philosophy, and all of them, without exception, say that if I forget having had a headache and cannot remember it, it is still the case that I had the headache, even if can never be verified.

Another way Dennett seems to get it wrong is where he says he "denies a possibility of consciousness of a stimulus in the absence of a subject's belief in that consciousness." The subject may have forgotten his previous consciousness of the stimulus, and Dennett gives us no reason to suppose that that consciousness of the stimulus is not still a fact about what occurred in the past even though it is unverifiable. He cannot know his previous conscious state.

Dennett goes on to say that what he calls "the infallibilist position" must be mistaken. He says "The infallibilist line on qualia treats them as properties of one's experience one cannot in principle misdiscover". (Dennett, 1990, 528) I take it that he is attacking the privileged access thesis that our knowledge of our own psychological states is superior in quality to anyone else's knowledge of our psychological states. Moreover, he seems to be attacking the thesis in its most extreme form, the infallibility version. To say my knowledge of my qualia is infallible is to say it is (somehow) impossible for me to be mistaken that I now taste the coffee as unpleasant. I

have a couple of points to make about the Chase and Sanborn example and the infallibility thesis.

First, no one who has ever defended the infallibility of first person knowledge of our mental states is committed to denying Dennett's thought experiment. Anyone who ever defended infallibility claims about knowledge of one's own qualia, such as Descartes, defended it in the immediate present. In its most plausible form the infallibility thesis holds that I cannot now be mistaken about how the coffee tastes to me. Dennett has no argument against this view in his example of the Chase and Sanborn intuition pump. The infallibility thesis is not all that easy to attack if it is construed as being about whether I can be wrong that I am having a given experience. Now I reject the infallibility thesis. Here is the reason why.

Talk about having infallible knowledge in the immediate present is misleading. If I sincerely believe I have a headache now, I cannot be wrong now, but I can realize that I was wrong at a later time. Otherwise, I'd have to know that I have a headache now even though it is not true. Consider my knowledge claim that I am now thinking. If this is infallible knowledge, it must be unmistakable over a short stretch of time that I can make a further judgment. If I believe my head did not really ache a short time later, and override my previous judgment, then the knowledge is not infallible. Knowledge of the external world we perceive is fallible because there is room to make a judgment away that we were mistaken based on looking again.

A second and more important point is that Dennett seems to be unaware of the other, weaker forms of privileged access that have appeared in the literature. For example, it has been asserted that it is wrong to defend infallibility claims about conscious states like qualia precisely because a person can override his or her own claims about their qualia that they are now experiencing. I can sip some coffee and decide a couple of seconds later that I was wrong about it tasting unpleasant to me. This admission is compatible with other, weaker forms of privileged access. One can claim that although I can be mistaken about my present qualia, no one else can show that I am mistaken, only I can. This kind of knowledge of our qualia has been called incorrigible knowledge. I mention it because one might argue that this kind of knowledge marks off, in a nonconfused way, the manner in which one can hold that qualia are 'private' to the possessor.

A referee for this journal has refuted this in the following way. He suggests the possibilities that one can be unsure about the meanings of the words used here, (as children often are), one could be in the grip of a crazy theory, a drug, or a form of autism that makes you poor at introspecting, or any number of other things that people can use to override your claims.

My reply is that his criticism is the problem of *ceteris paribus* clauses in the sciences. For any law of science, it is always possible to think of possible exceptions to the law. Scientists say the law tends to hold everything else being equal. So I will say that barring young children, crazy theories, drugs, autism, and other exceptions, there is a definite tendency for adult subjects in good order to enjoy what W.P. Alston called incorrigible knowledge with respect to our phenomenal mental states such as thoughts, images, and sensations. If I honestly and sincerely believe that I am thinking about the Michigan-Notre Dame game, no one else but me can show that I am not thinking about the Michigan-Notre Dame game. This is so even if I am on drugs or completely crazy. An autistic child may be too confused or inept to know what he is thinking about. But you do not know what he is thinking about, and cannot tell him what he is thinking about unless he agrees. This is the way our concepts work in common sense.

It does seem to me that the Chase and Sanborn case refutes the infallibility thesis but not the weaker incorrigibility thesis as I have stated them. But Dennett thinks his example refutes both forms of privileged access. He says “Chase’s intuitive judgments about his qualia constancy are no better off, epistemically, than his intuitive judgments about, say, lighting intensity constancy or room temperature constancy-or his own body temperature constancy”.(Dennett, 1990, 532) He admits that both Chase and Sanborn are quite on firm ground, epistemically, when they report that they used to like Maxwell House, and now they don’t. But they are in the dark about their convictions of what has stayed constant and what has shifted. My reply is that none of this seems to show that other people can override my sincere and confident claims that I am having a certain taste sensation. However, there are some other putative counterinstances to the incorrigibility view of our knowledge of our own sensations.

There seems to be a counterexample to the incorrigibility thesis as I have formulated it. I am in the habit of drinking nonalcoholic beer, which for all the world tastes like real beer. If someone were to blindfold me and have me taste a nonalcoholic beer and try to distinguish it from an alcoholic beer, I doubt that I could make the relevant discrimination. In this case the person who gives me the alcoholic beer to taste can override my claim to be tasting a nonalcoholic beverage. I think this kind of case could be multiplied with sufficient imagination, so it looks as if I do not have incorrigible privileged access to my taste sensations, since I can misidentify them.

The difficulty with this criticism of the incorrigibility thesis is that whether the beer contains alcohol in this example is not a property of my taste sensations or a judgment based on my sensations. The alcoholic content of the drink, or lack thereof, did not register with my taste sensations. So I can still have incorrigible knowledge of my sensations insofar as another

person's judgment cannot overturn my sincere and confident beliefs about my own sensations.

Elsewhere I have put forward the thesis that we have incorrigible knowledge of our sensations and thoughts, and have self-justifying or self-warranting knowledge of our dispositional mental states, such as wants and beliefs. Again, this thesis will have to be taken as a tendency with possible interfering factors. As far as I know, the views I defended have not been refuted. The view that our knowledge of our own mental states is self-justifying is put forward as a criterion of the mental. My view was that mental states of a human being can be marked off by something epistemological, by the way they are known by their possessor and only by their possessor. I chose self-justifying of self-warranting knowledge because it seemed to mark off the distinction I wished to make. At this point it will be helpful to set out more clearly what I mean by self-justifying knowledge. This concept was first crafted by William P. Alston in his paper "Varieties of Privileged Access." We can get at this mode of privileged access by using a familiar tripartite analysis of "S knows that P." The analysis consists of a conjunction of the following:

- A. S believes that P
- B. S is justified in believing P
- C. It is the case that P.

S has self-warranting or self-justifying knowledge when it tends to be impossible that S should believe that P and not be justified in believing that P. (Condition A for S's knowing that P has a tendency to imply condition B). (Alston, 1971) It is my contention that Alston's concept of self-justifying knowledge can be used as a criterion for all of our mental states. This is important here because, if I am correct about self-justifying knowledge, then we have privileged access to all of our mental states, and Dennett is wrong to reject privileged access to the mental. A referee has said that justified belief must be true. But that is not my conception of self-justifying belief. Alston is saying that merely having a belief about my wants or beliefs is logically sufficient to justify the belief. It is justified even though it may not be true. I am amending this to be construed as a tendency and the above considerations apply here. It should be noted here that since 1963 the analysis of knowing in terms of justified true belief has been thought to be debunked. But this schema will do without modifications for our purposes. However, self-justifying knowledge has come under attack from other sources worth looking at in recent years. I will look at those criticisms.

John L. Pollock argues against self-justifying knowledge in the context of arguing against foundationalism in epistemology. Pollock gives the following example. Suppose you have a clock that flashes a red light when it strikes the hour. The clock and the light are situated in the lower left

hand corner of your visual field and you are attending to a wasp buzzing around your nose in the center of your visual field. You believe something appears to be red without being directly aware of it. At one o'clock the clock strikes the hour and the red light flashes. You see it flash. Then at two o'clock the clock strikes the hour, but you are attending to a wasp buzzing around your nose in the center of your visual field. You don't notice the red light, but you judge that it is flashing based on poor inductive evidence from one instance. You have the qualia of a flashing red light, but you do not attend to it. Your belief that the red light is flashing is not justified because you make the judgment on insufficient evidence. You cannot say that beliefs about qualia are self-justifying only when attended to, because there are unattended qualia that we do not have self-justifying beliefs about. The conclusion is that it is possible to have qualia for which we do not have a self-justifying belief. (Pollock, 1986)

I have defended the position that we have self-justifying or self-warranting knowledge of all our psychological states. (Smythe, 1978) The above counterexample by Pollock seems to be sound, so the position will have to be revised. Instead of saying that we in fact have self-justifying belief of all our mental states, we can say that we can have self-justifying belief of any mental state. I can have self-justifying belief of the flashing red light if I attend to it. It is necessary to make this proviso anyway in order to account for unconscious mental states. I have defended the view that we have self-justifying knowledge of our conscious mental states, and we can have self-justifying knowledge of our unconscious mental states. Of course, they must become conscious first, if we are to have self-justifying knowledge of unconscious mental states. (Smythe, 1972) In light of the Pollock example, we can say that we have self-justifying knowledge of all the conscious mental states we are attending to, and we can have such knowledge of the rest of our psychological states. A referee says there are many mental states we are unconscious of that we cannot become conscious of, such the rules of grammar we follow unconsciously. I have to concede his point here, but it is still possible for some persons to become conscious of them.

Further clarification is needed. We don't want to say that we have self-justifying knowledge that there is a door here. I hold that statements based on sense perception are prima facie justified. What this means is that perceptual beliefs about the external world are presumed to be correct unless there is some reason to doubt them. Perceptual beliefs about the external world are not completely and fully justified just by having them as are beliefs about our mental states. Perceptual beliefs about the external environment can be unjustified if there is some reason to question them.

Beliefs about a pain I am having cannot be unjustified, although they can be false.

My belief that there is a door here is based on evidence that there is a door. My perception of the door, my being appeared to so I seem to see a door, constitutes evidence for the claim that there is a door here. My belief that I have a headache is not based on any perceptual evidence. I believe I have a headache because I feel a relevant pain, but such a belief has a tendency to be justified.

In more recent work Dennett rejects qualia by advocating that we describe a person's experience from a third person point of view rather than a first person point of view. Dennett advocates what he calls the 'heterophenomenological method'. As he describes it, "heterophenomenology is ...a method of phenomenological description that can in principle do justice to the most private and ineffable subjective experiences, while never abandoning the methodological scruples of science". The 'scruples' of the latter essentially involve "insistence on the third-person point of view".

This seems just wrong. How can subjective experience, with its privacy, which is something we experience from a first-person point of view, be explained from a third-person point of view? The answer is that it is our first-person testimony that is to be explained, which is accessible from a third-person point of view. Our verbalized statements about our private mental states are to be the empirical data that delimits our theories. But this makes qualia into explanatory devices and, of course, undermines their legitimacy. It undermines their legitimacy by reducing introspective evidence for qualia to verbal reports. I owe this last remark to a referee.

What I assert is that it is our conscious experiences themselves that are legitimate data, and not our verbal reports of them. This is to work within a tradition that goes at least as far back as Descartes of treating the first-person point of view as a legitimate source of data for such things as qualia. It is to say that we experience such things from a first-person point of view as the taste of honey, the smell of a rose, and the redness of a tomato, and that there is a datum, or qualia, that we are aware of in these cases. The qualia themselves are data we experience from the first-person point of view. A referee has pointed out that this faces a difficulty that the "data" will vanish each moment to moment. However, it seems we can retain a short term memory of the data in enough cases that will allow us to tend to have incorrigible knowledge of our qualia.

Dennett replies to such an objection by presenting a dialogue between himself and Otto (a defender of qualia):

Otto:Look. ...I don't just think there seems to be a pinkish glowing ring ; there really seems to be a pinkish glowing ring.

Dennett: Now you've done it. You've fallen into a trap, along with a lot of others.

You seem to think there is a difference between thinking (judging, deciding, being of the heartfelt opinion that) something seems pink to you and something really seeming pink to you. But there is no difference. There is no such phenomenon as really seeming-over and above the phenomenon of judging in some way or other that something is the case. (Dennett, 1991, 364)

Dennett is asserting that there is no difference of the kind that Otto is concerned with. Dennett does not argue for this. Dennett is asserting that all we have are judgments about our conscious experience. But consider his example of a pink glowing ring. I am having a visual experience and its content is of a pink glowing ring.

What kind of 'content' is this? What I want to say, and what Otto wants to say, is that the 'content' of the experience is the phenomenal character, the qualia, that is present in the experience. It is this that Otto is getting at when he complains 'but I really do seem to see...'. My view is that there is more going on in Otto than his propensity to make judgments, Otto has a first-person access to data in his own conscious experience which a theory of consciousness must consider.

What I think is a major motivation for Dennett (and many others) here is a concern for scientific objectivity. Psychology in the last century didn't really get any experimental results until it confined itself to intersubjective data. The data of introspection were inadequate data to build a theory with because such data were caught in a morass of individual differences. Thus psychology had no hope of succeeding as a science until it abandoned subjective qualitative states experienced from a first-person point of view. But psychologists need not go on to deny the existence of qualia. To ignore private data for the purpose of doing science is one thing, to deny that private data exist is another. The latter denial is not necessary in order to maintain a respect for science. (Alston, 1973)

In the other literature on Dennett, Sydney Shoemaker interprets Dennett as holding that perceptual seemings are 'presentiments', which are contentful states whose introspectible character is exhausted by their intentional content. Dennett agrees with this interpretation of his position. Shoemaker goes on to argue that there is an aspect of our experience of the world, an aspect of 'what it is like' to have them, that is not captured in behavioral and functional characterizations of mentality. Shoemaker says that elsewhere he has argued that we don't need to disqualify qualia to defend physicalism, and I agree. I say this because Dennett seems to think that quining qualia is good for a thoughtgoing physicalism. Shoemaker points

out that Dennett's denials are not necessary to support physicalism. I think this is a worthwhile observation. (Shoemaker, 1991, 1993)

Dennett's arguments center around the problem of verification. Both in these works and in later treatments, he presents cases where it is allegedly impossible to determine whether and when phenomenal consciousness has occurred. His eliminativist conclusion about qualia is primarily based on some sort of verificational indeterminacy. Since one cannot tell which qualia story is correct, there is no true story about qualia at all, and phenomenal consciousness, as ordinarily understood, is an illusion.

In a later publication, he presents the example of a man who briefly glimpses a woman without glasses run by and shortly afterward remembers her as wearing glasses. There are two alternative stories. The 'Orwellian' story says that there was a phenomenal experience of a lady with no glasses followed by a contamination of this experience by a previous memory of a woman with glasses. (This story is 'Orwellian' because history is rewritten). The 'Stalinesque' story says that no such phenomenal experience occurred. (This story is 'Stalinesque' because it presents false testimony). Dennett's claim is that there is no way to distinguish between these competing stories either 'from the inside' (by the observer himself) or 'from the outside', and he appears to conclude that there are no genuine facts about the putative phenomenal experience at all. (Dennett, 1991)

Another example concerns 'metacontrast'. A subject gets a short (30 milliseconds) presentation of a disk that is immediately followed by a ring whose inner border is just where the outside of the disk was. If the setup is right, the subject reports having seen only the ring. However, there is evidence that information about the disk is represented in the brain. For example, subjects are better than chance at guessing whether there were one or two stimuli. An Orwellian story would say that the subject had a conscious experience of both the disk and the ring, but that the latter wipes out the conscious memory of the disk. The Stalinesque story is that the disk is subjected to preconscious processing, but that the consciousness of it is prevented by the ring stimulus that follows. So the Orwellian and Stalinesque stories disagree about whether there was a brief flicker of consciousness of the disk that the subject does not remember. Dennett argues that there could be no matter of fact between these two stories, because they cannot be empirically discriminated. (Dennett and Kinsbourne, 1992)

I have some difficulty with this line of argumentation. First, even if it were true that nobody, including the subject, could subsequently determine which of the two stories is right, why does it follow that there is no fact of the matter? It may be impossible now for anyone to get decisive evidence about the height of Helen of Troy. It hardly follows that there is no fact of the matter, independent of our verification. This does not show that Dennett

is wrong, only that he has not shown that qualia do not exist. Second, Dennett claims that the experience would ‘feel the same’ on either account. Ned Block has pointed out that this assertion is just false, or at least question begging. If there is such a thing as conscious experience, there will be a slight subjective difference between a brief flicker of consciousness of the disk and no brief flicker. Such a flicker may go too quickly for the subject to detect or report it, however.

Third, I think that Dennett is too hasty to conclude that there could be no scientific evidence for choosing one story over the other. Suppose we find evidence from normal contexts (where there are no perceptual or memory tricks) for the Crick-Koch hypothesis that consciousness is related to the 40 to 70 -Hz neural oscillation, or for another Crick-Koch hypothesis that consciousness is fundamentally connected to activity in the larger pyramidal neurons in layer 5 of the neocortex. If we had converging evidence from standard cases to support some such hypothesis, we could use neural information to resolve the phenomenal facts in the case of metacontrast.

Conclusion

It is time to draw some conclusions. I have been arguing that Dennett fails to marshal any convincing argument that shows there are no qualia conceived as private data of conscious experience where there is something it is like to have that conscious experience. Dennett not only denies the existence of qualia, but he denies that conscious experience is private. I have shown that there are modes of privileged access that suffice to delineate the privacy of conscious experience. This includes, but is not limited to, self-justifying or self-warranting knowledge.

I'd like to thank a referee for his extremely helpful and incisive comments.

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