Knowledge on Trust
By Paul Faulkner
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We know much on the basis of being told. How do our reasons for accepting what we're told sustain knowledge? There are three main options. (1) Being told *p* provides access to one's interlocutor's reasons; where they know *p* access to their reasons enables us to know too. (2) We have independent reasons to accept that they know p. (3) Coming to know *p* is sustained by faith rather than reasons. Option (1) is mysterious: how can being told *p* provide access to another's reasons for accepting *p*? Option (2) seems to make one's interlocutor redundant: wouldn't reasons to accept that they know *p* have to include prior reasons to accept *p*? Option (3) confuses the epistemic with the practical: how can faith sustain knowledge? Paul Faulkner's book presents an intriguing attempt to avoid the perplexities attending (1)–(3) by developing a position that combines their virtues. Trusting an interlocutor for the truth can provide reasons to accept what they say. Accepting what they say enables one's belief to derive support from their reasons.

On the way to his account, Faulkner assesses alternatives. The most interesting are versions of option (1). We have a standing, but defeasible, entitlement to accept what we are told. Where the entitlement is undefeated, we thereby gain access to our interlocutor's reasons. Faulkner's main complaint against this view is, in effect, that it treats interlocutors as too closely akin to natural epistemic resources like perception or memory. It thereby fails to cope with the fact that interlocutors are agents whose purposes are not restricted to facilitating knowledge.

Tyler Burge presents one such account. The natures of systems that present contents as true— including interlocutors that tell us things—are such that we are a priori entitled to accept their deliverances. If we are to avoid epistemic regress, we must be entitled to rely upon the proper operation of some such systems. Where the function of a system is to present as true only what is true, our entitlement to rely on its proper operation is an entitlement to accept its presentations. The generality of the entitlement means that it applies to any system whose function is to present contents as true.

Burge presupposes that the dominant function of interlocutors is to present contents that are true. According to Faulkner, by contrast, interlocutors have additional practical functions. Their practical functions can condition them to speak artfully—to present contents as true when they aren't. It follows that even if we are entitled to rely upon the proper functioning of our interlocutors, we are not entitled to rely upon the truth of what they present as true. A general policy of presumptive reliance upon proper operation can't on its own provide epistemic support for accepting what one is told since it is not per se truth-conducive.

Faulkner takes John McDowell to present another account of this sort. The natural function of interlocutors qua interlocutors is to extend our autonomous epistemic powers. Our perceptual powers make available facts about our environment, retained through memory. Similarly, our power to respond appropriately to what we are told avails us of facts about our interlocutors' environments. On this view, an interlocutor whose access to reasons goes via by perception and memory can make those reasons available to others. Trusting engagement with what we are told can provide a different route to the same reasons. Of course, our powers are fallible. We can be taken in by misleading perceptual appearances and false or ignorant reporting. Indeed, there are bad cases in which we would be unable to determine that we were not being presented with reasons. Still, in good cases we have access to reasons that we would lack if we were in indistinguishable bad cases. Where someone speaks from knowledge, our reasons for accepting what they tell us are just their reasons for believing it; where they do not speak from knowledge, such reasons are absent.

Faulkner doesn't challenge McDowell's account of perceptual powers. However, he thinks the account is inapplicable to what we are told. Faulkner leaves open that our reasons for thinking a speaker has told us something can differ in cases in which we hear a speaker say it and reflectively indistinguishable cases in which we don't. However, the reasons provided by an interlocutor for accepting what they say must be the same in cases in which they speak from knowledge and

(indistinguishable) cases in which they don't. If Faulkner is right, we will need reasons distinct from our interlocutors' to accept what they say.

Faulkner's proposal is that our reasons for accepting what we are told are, in a certain sense, self-generated. Where we can bring ourselves to trust an interlocutor for the truth, our trust brings in train a presumption that they are trust-worthy. And—in propitious circumstances—our trust conjoined with its presumption can furnish evidence for accepting what they tell us. For—simplifying slightly— our trust would provide evidence if (a) the objective probability of what we are told being true, given our trust and its presuppositions, is above chance and (b) the objective probability that there is an explanatory connection between our trust and the telling's truth, given that trust and its presuppositions obtain, is also above chance. Hence, if we are in circumstances in which (a) and (b) hold, our trust can be evidence, and so an epistemic reason, for accepting that what our interlocutor tells us is true. And, further, even in circumstances in which (a) or (b) fail, so that trust does not furnish evidence, it can still provide epistemic reasons for acceptance. Finally, in our actual circumstances, trust can provide evidence since we are all responsive to norms that induce us to (tend to) be trust-worthy when trusted.

Faulkner's positive proposal is intriguing, and worthy of much further reflection. I recommend his book highly to anyone interested in these challenging issues. Let me end with a question. What, on Faulkner's view, is the precise epistemic function of trust? If trust both enables access to an interlocutor's reasons and also provides reasons of its own, it seems that the trusting audience's reasons for accepting p might outstrip the interlocutor's. Alternatively, if trust only enables access to an interlocutor's reasons, then it's not clear why it's required to be in general truth-conducive, or how it can give us reasons in bad cases in which our interlocutor has none. Finally, if our reasons are confined to those provided by our trust in an interlocutor, and if those reasons leave open a chance that what we are told is false, how can our reasons sustain knowledge?

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