

## More On Warrant's Entailing Truth\*

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In “Warrant Entails Truth”<sup>1</sup> I argue that warrant—that, whatever it is, which makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief—entails truth. And in that paper I claim to show that warrant entails truth “without assuming any particular analysis of warrant at all” (842).<sup>2</sup> I will here present a new (and improved!) version of the argument of “Warrant Entails Truth”. This new version of the argument also provides a response to Sharon Ryan’s challenging “Does Warrant Entail Truth?”<sup>3</sup>

The argument of this paper will rely on two claims about warrant. The first is that whether a belief is warranted or not is not a brute fact. A belief’s being warranted will supervene on other facts.<sup>4</sup> So if I have a warranted belief that p in one world but not in another, then the first world contains some other difference on which the difference in warrant supervenes. And—here is the second claim about warrant—that other difference

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<sup>1</sup>Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 55 (1995): 841-855.

<sup>2</sup>In that paper, I mistakenly conflate two projects: establishing that warrant entails truth without relying on any analysis of warrant and establishing this without making any assumptions at all about warrant, other than its being what makes the difference between mere true belief and knowledge. It is the first project that I defend here, and that I was actually—or at least ought to have been—defending in “Warrant Entails Truth”.

<sup>3</sup>Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 56 (1996): 183-192.

<sup>4</sup>I will not assume, as I did in “Warrant Entails Truth”, that warrant supervenes on only reasons for and causes of belief.

must involve some improvement in the “overall epistemic situation” with respect to my belief that p. I am not saying that the epistemic situation must improve overall, but rather that something relevant within that overall situation must improve. This is a very weak claim, and is correspondingly quite plausible.

We do not need an analysis of warrant to make some general comments about overall epistemic situations and what warrant supervenes on. My being warranted in believing that I am having lunch does not supervene on the number of rocks on some planet light years away. So a change in the number of rocks on that planet would not constitute a change in the overall epistemic situation with respect to my belief that I am having lunch. Warrant probably does supervene on things like one’s environment, the reasons for one’s belief, the causes of one’s belief, the reliability of one’s faculties, the defeaters present, and so on. So changes in these are changes in the overall epistemic situation. But not every such change is an improvement. Consider, for example, my belief forming faculties’ becoming less reliable.

Armed with our two claims about warrant, we can now defend the original argument of “Warrant Entails Truth”.<sup>5</sup> That argument tries to show that any false warranted belief leads to absurdity; so it is not possible that there be a false warranted belief; so warrant entails truth.

The original argument asks us to suppose (for reductio) that, in a possible world W, I have the false warranted belief that Jones owns a Ford Escort. Now imagine another world W\* that differs from W in that—seconds before I form the belief that Jones owns an Escort—Jones’ aunt dies, thousands of miles away and unbeknownst to Jones or me, bequeathing Jones an Escort. W\* differs from W in all that this difference entails but in no other way.

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<sup>5</sup>I will discuss the most important of the two arguments of “Warrant Entails Truth.” For the record, I think the other argument of that paper is sound, and that its crucial premise—named ‘G3’ by Ryan (187)—is quite plausible. That premise makes a claim about the sorts of inferences that preserve warrant.

The fact that—as we assumed for reductio—my belief that Jones owns an Escort is warranted in W gives us reason to believe it is warranted in W\*. But in W\* it is accidentally true. And a warranted accidentally true belief is impossible, since, necessarily, all warranted true beliefs are knowledge and, necessarily, no accidentally true belief is knowledge. So the assumption that my belief that Jones owns an Escort is false and warranted leads to absurdity.

The linchpin of this argument is the claim that if my belief is warranted in W, then it is warranted in W\*. Ryan objects that this move can be defended only by presupposing some substantive analysis of warrant (191).<sup>6</sup> In response, I will now go beyond what was contained in “Warrant Entails Truth”, and defend this move by presupposing only the two claims about warrant made above.

W and W\* are alike in the environment—for thousands of miles around—in which I formed my belief, in the reasons for and causes of my belief, in all my psychological states, and so on. There is no defeater for my belief in W\* that is not also a defeater for that belief in W. If it will help, we can add that Jones’ aunt dies and bequeaths in W as well, a few seconds after I formed my belief (though at the time in question my belief is still false). So the only difference between W and W\* is that a woman thousands of miles away from me dies a few seconds later in one than in the other. I submit that there is no difference between the worlds that would constitute a plausible difference in the supervenience base for my belief’s warrant. So if warrant is supervenient, then I am warranted in one world if and only if I am warranted in the other.

One might object that there is an important difference between W and W\* that could account for a difference in warrant. In W my belief that Jones owns an Escort is

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<sup>6</sup>And she adds that her proposed analysis of warrant precludes this move (191). So my defense of this move is also an argument against Ryan’s proposed analysis. And Ryan’s analysis is flawed in any event. It is equivalent to the claim that a belief is warranted if and only if it is both justified and either false or non-accidentally true. But it is implausible that all false justified beliefs are warranted.

false, but in  $W^*$  it is true. But—here the second claim about warrant comes into play—this difference could account for my belief's being warranted in  $W$  but not in  $W^*$  only if my belief's being false constitutes an improvement in  $W$ 's overall epistemic situation as compared to that of  $W^*$ . But a belief's becoming false is not an improvement in the overall epistemic situation regarding that belief. It cannot be that my belief becomes warranted just in virtue of my belief forming mechanisms' becoming less reliable, my environment's becoming more deceptive, and so on. Similarly, it cannot be that my belief becomes warranted just in virtue of its becoming false.<sup>7</sup>

Consider another example. Suppose (for reductio) that I have the false warranted belief, in  $W_1$ , that there is a pear on the table in front of me. I have been deceived by a pear-like hologram, which I mistake for a pear. Consider a nearby possible world,  $W_2$ , differing from  $W_1$  only in that my belief is true and in all this entails. I think that if my belief is warranted in  $W_1$  it is warranted in  $W_2$ . Thus my belief's being false and warranted in  $W_1$  leads to the absurdity of a warranted accidentally true belief in  $W_2$ .

But, in this particular case, for my belief to go from being false to being accidentally true, there must be a change in my environment. For since my belief is true in  $W_2$ , there is in  $W_2$ , in addition to the pear-like hologram which causes me to believe

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<sup>7</sup>Consider two objections that maintain that the overall epistemic situation in  $W$  contains some improvement over that in  $W^*$ .

First objection: in  $W$ , unlike in  $W^*$ , my belief fails to be accidentally true. Response: to fail to be accidentally true just is to be false or non-accidentally true. Since becoming false is no improvement, neither is becoming false or non-accidentally true.

Second objection: in  $W$ , but not in  $W^*$ , the following subjunctive conditional is true: if my belief were true, it would not be accidentally true. (This is the line taken in Frances and Daniel Howard-Snyders' "What Gettier Did Not Teach Us" (1996 Central Division APA).) Response: this subjunctive conditional must be grounded in the overall epistemic situation; so it is not itself (an independent) part of that situation. Therefore, one cannot rely on this conditional to constitute an improvement in the overall epistemic situation in the absence of any other improvement that grounds it. Moreover, one could argue that  $W^*$  is the closest world to  $W$  in which my belief is true; thus the conditional is false in  $W$ .

there is a pear on the table, a genuine pear on the table. And that difference between  $W_1$  and  $W_2$ , one might reasonably object, constitutes a difference in overall epistemic situation. So, one might insist that although my belief is warranted in  $W_1$ , it is not in  $W_2$ .

The response to this objection should be clear. The overall epistemic situation of  $W_1$ , although perhaps different from that of  $W_2$ , is not better than that of  $W_2$ . The situations in  $W_1$  and  $W_2$  seem equally poor. Both contain misleading pear holograms. Indeed, if one is better than the other, it would seem to be the one in  $W_2$ , in which, at least, my pear belief is true. Since the overall epistemic situation with respect to my pear belief in  $W_1$  contains no improvement over the situation in  $W_2$ , it cannot be that my belief is warranted in  $W_1$  but not in  $W_2$ .

We can generalize the above argument. Suppose for reductio that S has the warranted false belief that p in some possible world. This implies that there is a second possible world in which the overall epistemic situation with respect to S's belief that p is no worse than it is in the first world, but in which S's belief that p is accidentally true. Since the overall epistemic situation is no better in the first world than in the second, if S's belief that p is warranted in the first world, it is warranted in the second. But if it is warranted in the first, then in the second it is warranted and accidentally true. And that is impossible.

Given our two assumptions about warrant, there is only one premise of the preceding argument that can be questioned:

(1) For any proposition p and any agent S for whom p is possibly accidentally true, if S is warranted in believing p in some possible world W and p is false in W, then there is another world  $W^*$  in which p is accidentally true for S and in which the overall epistemic situation with respect to S's belief that p is no worse in any respect than it is in W.

(1) is not self-evident. But there is quite a bit to be said in its favor. Carefully considering many examples, such as the pear-like hologram and Jones and the Escort, testifies to the plausibility of (1).

(1) is restricted to those propositions which are possibly accidentally true for a believer. So necessary falsehoods, for example, fall outside of (1)'s purview. If there are no counterexamples to (1), then we are left with a choice. Either endorse the claim that warrant entails truth, or endorse the claim that, except for beliefs that are possibly false but not possibly accidentally true, warrant entails truth. In "Warrant Entails Truth" I called this latter claim 'Restricted Fallibilism II'. I think that warrant entails truth is more plausible than Restricted Fallibilism II.

One might express skepticism about "overall epistemic situations" and thereby question our ability to judge the truth or falsity of (1). One might insist that, without a substantive analysis of warrant in hand, we have no idea what counts as an improvement in an overall epistemic situation or even what should be included in an overall epistemic situation. But such skepticism is unreasonable. Surely we know that, for instance, my becoming less reliable is, as such, no improvement. And we should also agree that whether there is an even number of rocks on some distant planet is not part of the overall epistemic situation regarding my belief that I am sitting in my office.

This is not to deny that there are cases in which it is controversial whether something counts as an improvement in the overall epistemic situation. But it is important to note that such cases will be relevant, in the present context, only insofar as they might pose counterexamples to (1). And even controversial cases like these will lose most of their interest if there are uncontroversial cases of improvement or worsening in the overall epistemic situation that issue in counterexamples to (1). So the real issue is whether or not there are counterexamples to (1).

If there are counterexamples to (1)—I don't think there are—their significance depends on their scope and type. Suppose it turns out that it is only a very special class of warranted false beliefs—call them 'class C'—that cannot be shown, by the reasoning embodied in (1), to lead to absurdity. If Class C is small enough, the arguments of this paper will have demonstrated the significant result that nearly all beliefs are such that

they cannot be warranted and false. This is, in effect, the kind of position embraced by one who accepts Restricted Fallibilism II. And if class C is of a certain sort, it may be more reasonable to accept that warrant entails truth than to accept that beliefs in class C can be warranted and false, but that no other beliefs can. This is, in effect, the reasoning of one who decides that the claim that warrant entails truth is more plausible than Restricted Fallibilism II.

This paper is progress in the debate over whether warrant entails truth. It should now be clear, as it was not before, that debate over warrant's entailing truth must focus on (1). And, as I noted above, carefully considering many examples, such as the pear-like hologram and Jones and the Escort, testifies to the plausibility of (1).