

# WELL-FOUNDED BELIEF AND PERCEPTUAL JUSTIFICATION

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(published in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*)

## Abstract

According to Alan Millar, justified beliefs are well-founded beliefs. Millar cashes out the notion of well-foundedness in terms of having an adequate reason to believe something and believing it for that reason. To make his account of justified belief compatible with perceptual justification he appeals to the notion of recognitional ability. It is argued that, due to the fact that Millar's is a knowledge-first view, his appeal to recognitional abilities fails to offer an explanatory account of familiar cases in the literature and, as a consequence, of the notion of perceptual justification.

Alan Millar (2014) puts forward an account according to which justified beliefs are well-founded beliefs. Millar cashes out the notion of well-foundedness in terms of having an adequate reason to believe something and believing it for that reason, and gives three necessary conditions for a reason to be adequate.<sup>1</sup> A reason to believe that  $p$  is adequate only if:

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<sup>1</sup> When Millar talks of reasons being adequate he does not mean *explanatory* or *motivating* reasons—i.e., the reasons one has for believing whatever one actually believes— but *normative* reasons—i.e., true considerations to believe something.

R-FACTIVITY: what constitutes the reason is true,

R-SAFETY: not easily could it be that one believes that  $p$  for that reason and yet it be false that  $p$ ,

R-KNOWLEDGE: what constitutes the reason is something that one knows.

Millar, who is well-aware that many epistemologists do not see how accounts of justified belief in terms of reasons can explain the justification of perceptual beliefs, appeals to the notion of perceptual-recognitional ability to show how his account of well-foundedness is compatible with perceptual justification. The aim of this paper is to argue that Millar's appeal to recognitional abilities does not result in an explanatory account of familiar cases in the literature and, as a consequence, of the notion of perceptual justification.

When applied to the perceptual case, Millar's account of well-foundedness says that a perceptual belief is justified only if it has been formed for safe and factive reasons—R-SAFETY, R-FACTIVITY— and such reasons are constituted by one's perceptual knowledge—R-KNOWLEDGE. In this way, by explaining perceptual justification in terms of perceptual knowledge, Millar treats knowledge as explanatorily prior to justified belief, to the extent that he believes that "there is no prospect of a reductive account of knowledge in terms that include justified true belief" (Millar 2014: 8). That is, Millar's account of perceptual justification is a knowledge-first view.

Why exactly is Millar's view knowledge-first? There are several theses typically associated to knowledge-first epistemology. One is that the concept of knowledge cannot be analysed or decomposed into more basic concepts—alternatively: that knowledge is a non-composite state. A different but related thesis is that knowledge is explanatorily prior to other epistemically interesting concepts such as belief and justification. Yet an-

other thesis is that knowledge is a sui generis mental state.<sup>2</sup> Williamson (2000), the champion of knowledge-first epistemology, holds all of them. However, the latter, which is a claim that belongs to the philosophy of mind, not only has found strong resistance in the literature—e.g., Leite 2005; McGlynn 2014; Reed 2005—, it is also unnecessary that an account of epistemic justification upholds it to count as knowledge-first. In other words, the thesis that knowledge is a mental state is optional. By contrast, the two non-negotiable purely epistemological assumptions that automatically make a view of epistemic justification a knowledge-first view is that knowledge cannot be analysed and that it is explanatorily prior to justification. Millar upholds both of them.<sup>3</sup>

Dissatisfaction with the project of analysing knowledge might make one find a knowledge-first strategy appealing when it comes to theorizing about knowledge or justified belief. However, in pursuing such a strategy one might also encounter a problem: the problem of giving informative non-ad hoc explanations of familiar cases in the literature. More specifically, the *explanatory problem* consists in explaining in a non-ad hoc way why familiar cases are cases of ignorance or unjustified belief and how they differ from cases of knowledge and justified belief.

First, I will introduce the general structure of the problem. Then, I will argue that Millar's view falls prey to it and that, as a consequence, it fails to offer an explanatory account of perceptual justification.

The explanatory problem—for knowledge-first accounts of knowledge and justified belief—has two sources—or comes in two guises—depending on the type of knowledge-first view in consideration.<sup>4</sup> A knowledge-first

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<sup>2</sup> See McGlynn (2014) for relevant discussion of these and other theses typically associated to knowledge-first epistemology.

<sup>3</sup> See Millar (Ch. 5, in Haddock, Millar and Pritchard 2010) for further discussion. See Kelp (*forthcoming*) and Sutton (2007) for different knowledge-first accounts of epistemic justification.

<sup>4</sup> The explanatory problem is a *potential* problem for all knowledge-first views, but whether specific views actually fall prey to it is to be judged on a case-by-case basis. The

view—of knowledge or justified belief—might only give necessary conditions  $p_1 \wedge p_2 \wedge \dots p_n$  for knowledge or justification, so that it predicts that for some—but not for all—cases of ignorance or unjustified belief  $\neg p_1 \vee \neg p_2 \vee \dots \neg p_n$ , i.e., that at least one of the necessary conditions fails in some cases but not in all of them.<sup>5</sup> The first way in which the problem might arise is that there might be cases of ignorance or unjustified belief in which all the necessary conditions obtain. When confronted with this kind of case, a knowledge-firster might either give no explanation, so that the account fails to be explanatory of its target—knowledge or justified belief—in a relevant sense, or alternatively she might introduce a further necessary condition and then appeal to its failure in the unexplained case, something that certainly strikes one as an ad hoc move.<sup>6</sup>

The second way in which the explanatory problem might arise is when the very concept of knowledge is invoked to explain familiar cases of ignorance or unjustified belief. For the concept of knowledge itself is not very explanatory of why there is no knowledge or justified belief in a particular case. For instance, if to the question “Why does *S* ignore or have an unjustified belief that *p* in case  $C_1$ ?” a knowledge-firster replied “because *S*

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only claim here is that Millar’s view does fall prey to it.

<sup>5</sup> Putting forward necessary conditions for an epistemic concept does not make knowledge-first views reductive because there might be no set of conditions that are in turn jointly sufficient independently of knowledge. See Williamson (2000: 32-3) for relevant discussion.

<sup>6</sup> Reductive accounts of knowledge or justified belief do not need to make such a move. They are explanatory by default because they claim that any item that meets all their necessary conditions is an instance of knowledge *and* nothing else is an instance of knowledge. Although particular analyses might be of course proven wrong, they always show interesting conceptual similarities between their individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions and the distribution of the different cases of knowledge and ignorance or of justified and unjustified belief. By way of illustration, reliabilist analyses of knowledge or justified belief might be proven wrong, but they can at least explain the presence or absence of knowledge or justified belief in *all* cases in a principled way, namely in virtue of the fact that the belief-forming processes involved in those cases are or are not reliable. There lies the explanatory power of conceptual analysis. See Kingsbury and McKeown-Green (2009) for relevant discussion on the epistemic value of conjunctive definitions of theoretically posited concepts.

does not know that  $p$  in  $C_1$ ", one would be clearly dissatisfied with the explanatory power of the answer. This is even more evident if when further asked for the difference between  $C_1$  and a case of knowledge or justified belief  $C_2$  the knowledge-firster merely replied "only in  $C_2$   $S$  knows that  $p$ ".

In general, in order to make the explanation of cases like  $C_1$  and of the difference with cases like  $C_2$  more informative, knowledge-firsters need to appeal to the failure of some of the necessary conditions for knowledge they are committed to—e.g., that knowledge is factive, that knowledge requires reliable belief, and so on. However, once again, there might be cases of ignorance or unjustified belief in which all the necessary conditions of a knowledge-firster's repertory obtain, in which case the first aspect of the explanatory problem re-emerges: either the target cases are left unexplained, or further necessary conditions are introduced in an ad hoc manner to explain them. My claim is that Millar faces this kind of dilemma. To show it, we need to take a closer look at his account of knowledge and justified belief.

Millar is interested in investigating the acquisition of knowledge in several ways—including perception, testimony and knowledge from indicators—by identifying the kind of abilities whose exercise allow us to acquire knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In the case of perception, he thinks that we acquire knowledge by exercising what he calls *perceptual-recognitional abilities*: "we explain the status of perceptual knowledge—its status as knowledge—in terms of its acquisition being *the exercise of a suitable recognitional ability*" (Millar 2014: 10; emphasis added).

According to Millar, perceptual-recognitional abilities consist in having command of ways of telling of objects that are of certain kinds from the way they look in the case of visual-recognitional abilities, from the way they sound in the case of auditory-recognitional abilities, and so on for the

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<sup>7</sup> See his contribution in Haddock et al. (2010).

rest of sense modalities.

The necessary conditions for a recognitional ability to be exercised mirror the necessary conditions for a reason to be adequate. To see this, the first thing to notice is that, for Millar, “the notion of *the exercise of a perceptual-recognitional ability* is a *success notion*” in the sense that “I do not exercise the ability to  $\varphi$  unless I  $\varphi$ ” (Millar 2010: 125). In other words, there cannot be exercises of a perceptual-recognitional ability that are not acts of recognition, that is, cases in which one *ignores* that the object is of a certain kind.

By way of illustration, concerning the visual ability to recognize magpies, Millar thinks that “since the ability is to recognize magpies to be magpies from the way they look, (...) *it is exercised only when one does just that*” (Millar 2010: 10; emphasis added). Concerning the ability to tell by listening to a performance of music that it is by Haydn, he thinks that “[i]f I were mistakenly to judge a performance of music to be by Haydn when it is by Mozart then I would not have exercised the ability” (Millar 2010: 125).

In sum, all exercises of recognitional ability need to produce knowledge. Since knowledge is factive, this means that the objects recognized also need to be of the kind they appear to be. Related to this latter point, the final necessary condition for exercising recognitional ability that Millar explicitly endorses is a sort of safety condition:

To be able to recognize Fs by sight, and thus from ways they look, it is necessary that there should be some appearance that is *distinctive* of Fs in that with a high degree of reliability the possession of that appearance by things indicates that they are Fs. When an appearance of something is distinctive of Fs, *not easily could something have this appearance and not be an F*. (Millar 2010: 125; emphasis added).

To be clear, Millar introduces a safety condition (in italics) as a necessary

requirement for the appearance of an object being distinctive of the kind of object it is, and he then regards the fact that an appearance is distinctive as necessary for exercising recognitional ability. Therefore, the safety requirement is also necessary for the latter.

In the light of the previous considerations, Millar's account of the notion of exercising perceptual-recognitional ability can be schematically reconstructed as follows. Given a certain object of a certain kind in a certain environment *E*, call the fact that the object *appears* to one as being of kind *K* '*A*'. According to Millar, one exercises a recognitional ability when it comes to telling of an object that is of a certain kind *K* on the basis of *A* in *E* only if one believes that the object is of kind *K* on the basis of *A* in *E* and:

A-FACTIVITY: the object is of kind *K*,

A-SAFETY: not easily could it be that one believes that the object is of kind *K* on the basis of *A* and yet it be false that the object is of kind *K*,

A-KNOWLEDGE: one perceptually knows that the object is of kind *K*.<sup>8</sup>

Millar's explanation of how our recognitional abilities provide us with adequate reasons—and hence justification—for our perceptual beliefs is simple and straightforward. Suppose that one looks at a magpie in favourable conditions. Millar (2014: 13) claims: "When I know that the bird is a magpie from the way it looks, I have a reason for so believing constituted by the fact that I see that it is". Simply put: the fact that one knows that the bird is a magpie *as a result of an exercise of recognitional ability* constitutes an adequate reason for one to believe that the bird is a magpie. If one believes it for that reason, one's belief is well-founded, that is, justified.

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<sup>8</sup> A-KNOWLEDGE is not the claim that, in order to exercise recognitional ability, the relevant knowledge needs to be possessed already by the perceiver; instead, it is the exercise of such an ability that must produce the relevant knowledge.

Let us turn back to the explanatory problem. How would Millar's knowledge-first account of perceptual justification explain a case of false belief? For example, suppose that something strikes one as being a magpie but is in reality a fake magpie. Why does the mere appearance of the bird fail to provide adequate reason to believe that the bird is a magpie? Merely appealing to the failure of A-KNOWLEDGE is certainly not very explanatory—in this and in any case. For that reason, Millar would need to appeal—at the very least—to the fact that *knowledge is factive*, that is, to the fact that it is not a magpie but a fake magpie which triggers the appearance of a magpie—i.e., A-FACTIVITY fails.

Likewise, if one asked for the difference between a case of false belief and a case of true belief but no knowledge, Millar would plausibly appeal to the failure of A-FACTIVITY in the former case. For example, suppose that the bird one is looking at is a magpie and so it looks to one, but one does not know it because one is in an environment in which there are many fake magpies around that one could have easily encountered.<sup>9</sup> What is the difference between this case and the former case in which one is before a fake magpie? Obviously, the difference between two cases of ignorance cannot be explained in terms of the failure of A-KNOWLEDGE in both of them. Instead, the natural move is to appeal to the failure of A-FACTIVITY in the latter case.

However, merely appealing to A-FACTIVITY is not sufficient to explain the difference between other cases: for instance, between a case in which one knows and therefore has a well-founded belief that the bird before one is a magpie and the fake-magpies case or structurally equivalent cases. In other words, A-FACTIVITY is of no help to explain the difference between cases of true belief in which one knows and cases of true belief in which one does not.

Notice that Millar's treatment of cases like the fake-magpies case con-

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<sup>9</sup> The case corresponds to the widely-discussed fake-barns case—see Goldman 1976.

sists in appealing to the fact that in such cases the relevant appearances are not distinctive,<sup>10</sup> where the notion of distinctive appearance is cashed out, as we have seen, in terms of a safety condition that can be plausibly reconstructed as A-SAFETY. In this sense, from the failure of A-SAFETY in the fake-magpies case Millar can say that, unlike the situation in which one has perceptual knowledge, the fake-magpie environment is not favourable to exercising perceptual-recognitional ability because *too easily* could one have formed false magpie-beliefs on the basis of the same appearance.

But the problem with a safety-based explanation is that it cannot be applied to cases with the structure of the fake-magpies case but in which one knows. Suppose that one is in a field with lots of magpies flying around and absolutely no fake magpies. The peculiarity of the case is that there are many holes in the field such that if one fell in one of them, one would be automatically connected to a virtual reality that would feed one with magpie-experiences. While walking around, one pays no attention to the holes because one is captivated by the beautiful coordinated flight of the flock of magpies in the clear blue sky. As a matter of fact, one does not fall into any of the holes. Presumably, one can visually discriminate the magpies in that environment and thus have knowledge and hence well-founded magpie-beliefs.

The puzzle for Millar consists in explaining why the circumstances are favourable to the exercise of recognitional ability—given that one knows—despite the fact that the relevant appearances are not distinctive and hence not apt for exercising recognitional ability by A-SAFETY standards. The puzzle is troublesome for two reasons: (1) merely appealing to the fact that one knows in the holes case leads back to the explanatory problem; (2)

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<sup>10</sup> Millar says the following about the fake-magpies case and structurally equivalent cases such as the fake-barns case: “A perspective on barn examples: the subject does not know in the fake-barn scenario because there barns lack a distinctive visual appearance and one cannot tell of structures that they are barns from their visual appearance” (Millar 2010: 92).

an informative explanation of the case must be consistent with the safety-based explanation of the fake-magpies case given by Millar.

Millar could obviously react by arguing that the holes case is not a case of knowledge. But the literature against the necessity for knowledge of the safety principle is populated with many similar examples of unsafe knowledge crying out for an explanation.<sup>11</sup> The argument is of course not a knock-down argument against Millar, but a minimal conclusion can be drawn: Millar's knowledge-first account is no better off than reductive accounts featuring safety principles when it comes to explaining the difference between familiar cases in the literature.

At any rate, there is a subtler argument against Millar which *does not rely on knowledge or ignorance intuitions* in any crucial way. One key idea of Millar's rationale for the cases is that one can exercise recognitional ability only in favourable circumstances, where a set of circumstances counts as favourable only if the relevant appearances are distinctive and, namely, only if A-FACTIVITY and A-SAFETY hold. Suppose that one is in a room in front of a glass cage with a magpie inside. The glass is also a holographic screen showing indistinguishable representations of a magpie in the cage—while the real magpie is, unbeknownst to one, inside. The holographic screen is activated at regular intervals alternating with intervals in which the hologram is deactivated and in which one can see the real magpie inside through the clear transparent glass. Call intervals in which the holographic screen is off and one sees the real magpie 'good intervals' and intervals in which it is on and one sees a holographic representation of the magpie 'bad intervals'. In addition, suppose that the shift between the good and the bad intervals is unnoticeable.

Now suppose that the good intervals are long enough so that when one looks at the cage and sees the magpie, one can know that there is a magpie

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<sup>11</sup> For a recent counterexample see Bogardus (2014). For relevant discussion see Broncano-Berrocal (2014).

in the cage. Long good intervals might be one year, one month, one week or one day long. The precise length is irrelevant for the purposes of the argument as long as there is a certain length giving rise to the intuition that one knows that there is a magpie in the cage during the good intervals.

The next step in the thought experiment consists in reducing the length of the intervals gradually, to the point where one loses the intuition that one knows that there is a magpie in the cage *during the good intervals*. For example, the short good intervals might be one hour, one minute or one second long—or even less depending on one’s intuitions. The important point is that one finds the suitable length of time where one would stop thinking that one knows that there is a magpie in the cage—when looking at the real magpie—through the clean transparent glass.

Notice that, no matter how short or how bad they are, in all intervals one forms the *true* belief that there is a magpie in the cage, because the real magpie is always inside, so both A-FACTIVITY and A-SAFETY hold. This means that Millar cannot appeal to their failure and in turn to the fact that the relevant appearances are not distinctive to explain why the circumstances are not favourable for exercising visual-recognitional ability.

Millar’s account of perceptual justification is in a delicate dialectical situation: since in both the long and the short good interval cases one sees the real magpie and one tells of it that it is a magpie from the way it looks, it is unclear why one’s true belief during the short interval *good* case is not well-founded. Of course, the difference between the long and the short interval cases is that one respectively has and lacks knowledge, and Millar could certainly appeal to that to explain why one does not exercise visual-recognitional ability in the short good interval case—and hence to explain why the corresponding magpie-beliefs are not well-founded. However, that would bring him back to the explanatory problem: the concept of knowledge is itself not very explanatory, so he would have to leave the

case unexplained or to introduce further necessary conditions on pain of ad hocness.

The upshot is not surprising: the initial appeal of Millar's knowledge-first account of perceptual justification—that it steers clear of the difficulty of giving a satisfactory analysis of Gettier-style justification—is counterbalanced by the high cost of losing all its explanatory power when it comes to the cases. The greater weight of the latter seems to tip the scales in favour of the old reductive approach to perceptual justification.

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