Self-Knowledge and the Alt-Ground Test

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1. Introduction: Self-Knowledge and the appearance of Epistemic Ungroundedness

It is commonly observed that our judgments about our own current mental states appear to be ‘epistemically ungrounded’. This thought is supported by appeal to the apparent impropriety of questions such as “How do you know that you want a chai latte?” or “... have a tickle behind your left ear?”, or “... believe it will snow tomorrow?” or “... feel uneasy?”, or “What are your reasons for accepting that you want a chai latte?” (or etc.).

The impropriety seems to go deeper than mere pragmatics. Because it’s not only that such questions are unusual ones to ask, it’s also hard to see how they could have substantive answers. All I seem able to say if asked how I know I want a chai latté, for example, is something like, “Because I do want one!”, or “I just know”.

These answers seem to suggest that the fact that I want a chai latté is something I’m in a position to know without any epistemic grounds. Yet it a very standard epistemological assumption is that a judgment amounts to knowledge only if it is true, and somehow epistemically grounded: mere true belief is insufficient for knowledge.

So we have an apparent paradox, which it will be useful to state in relation to a particular judgment about what psychological state one is currently in (henceforth, a ‘psychological self-judgment’):

1. My judgment that I want a chai latte is not epistemically grounded
2. My judgment that I want a chai latte embodies knowledge that I want a chai latte
3. If a judgment embodies knowledge it must be epistemically grounded

Claims (2) and (3) are sometimes questioned in the literature, but by far the most common strategy is to reject (1), by granting that psychological self-judgments appear epistemically ungrounded, but denying that they in fact are. According to this – orthodox – approach (I will continue to label it as such), psychological self-judgments can constitute knowledge, and when they do, they do so in virtue of being based on hidden epistemic grounds.

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1 Thanks, for financial support, to the Analysis Trust, and for helpful discussion, to Chris Cowie, Alexander Greenberg and Jane Heal.

2 Wittgenstein has been read as rejecting (2), in saying “It can’t be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I know I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean – except perhaps that I am in pain?” (Wittgenstein 2001, §246). Another way of denying (2) is to deny that my psychological self-knowledge that I want a chai latte is constituted by my belief that I want one at all. For two very differently-motivated versions of this idea, see (Hyman 1999; Mellor 1978). (3) is rejected by contemporary expressivists such as e.g. (Bar-On 2004; Finkelstein 2003, 148–52), by constitutivist conceptions of self-knowledge such as that in (Wright 1998), by accounts which understand psychological self-judgments’ status as knowledge as transcendently determined (Burge 1996), and by certain rationalist ‘agentialist’ accounts, such as those in (Boyle 2009; Moran 2001).
The orthodox approach takes as many different shapes as there are suggestions about what our psychological self-judgments’ ‘hidden grounds’ might be, but in this paper I want to abstract away from these differences, and suggest that there is reason to reject the orthodox approach which is independent of any of its particular manifestations.

I will propose a general test for when a judgment is epistemically grounded, which is neutral on the question of what the judgment’s ground might be, and on the question of whether or not we should expect a judgment to appear epistemically grounded. If we have a test for epistemic groundedness which is neutral in these two respects, then we can apply it without begging any questions in favour or against the orthodox view, and without considering any particular version of that view.

The test I will propose is very simple. It says that if a person’s judgment is epistemically grounded in some way, then it is conceivable to think of this judgment, in a different context, as grounded in some other way. I’ll call it the ‘alternative ground test for epistemic groundedness’, or ‘the alt-ground test’ for short.

2. Getting a feel for the alt-ground test

In order to get a feel for how the test works, we can start by apply it to judgments which have specific and uncontroversial epistemic grounds. The aim here is, as it were, to start putting the test to the test.

We will stipulate some ‘actual-world’ situations in which someone’s judgment that \( p \) is grounded in a particular way, and show how the test generates the right result, viz. that the judgment that \( p \) is epistemically grounded. Consider first:

**Case 1**

*Actual world 1:*

Seeing that Alexander's shoes aren't in their usual place by the door, and knowing that this usually means that he's out wearing them, I judge that Alexander is out of the house.

Can we construct a case in which this very judgment – that Alexander is out of the house – is conceivably grounded in some other way? Yes, very easily:

*Test world 1:*

I'm in the pub and in walks Alexander. I judge on this basis that Alexander is out of the house.

The alt-ground test thus tells us just what we want to hear: because the situation in *Test world 1* is conceivable, the test tells us that my judgment in *Actual world 1* is epistemically grounded. And it is – *ex hypothesi.*

Again, consider:

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3 See e.g. (Armstrong 1968; Gallois 1996; Byrne 2011; Carruthers 2011; Fernandez 2003; Valaris 2011) etc. etc.
Case 2

Actual world 2:

Francesca tells me that she wants a chai latte, and, taking her at her word, I judge that Francesca wants a chai latte.

Can we construct a case in which this very judgment – that Francesca wants a chai latte – is conceivably grounded in some other way? Again, we can:

Test world 2:

I know that Francesca has just finished a long day working in the library, and that she usually wants a chai latte after a hard day's work. So I judge that Francesca wants a chai latte.

As before, the alt-ground test gives us the right result: because the situation in Test world 2 is conceivable, the test tells us that my judgment in Actual world 2 is epistemically grounded. And it is – again, ex hypothesi.

In these two cases, a judgment based on one set of a posteriori grounds is tested by conceiving of its being based on a different set of a posteriori grounds. But the alt-ground test can also be applied across the a priori/a posteriori divide. Consider:

Case 3

Actual world 3:

Jenni usually cycles to work, but has a flat tyre so has to walk this morning. She calculates that, because she walks at about 3 mph, and the engineering faculty (where she works) is about 1.5 miles from home, it will take her about half an hour to get to work this morning.

Test world 3:

Jenni usually cycles to work, but has a flat tyre so has to walk to work this morning. This happened a few months ago too, and she remembers walking to the engineering faculty took her about half an hour. She judges that it will take about half an hour to get to work this morning.

Once more, because Jenni’s judgment in Actual world 3 passes the alt-ground test – because the situation in Test world 3 is conceivable – the alt-ground test tells us that Jenni’s judgment in Actual world 3 is epistemically grounded. And this is just what we stipulated to be the case.

So far, the test seems like it gets us the right results. I will discuss some general considerations underlying the applicability of the test in §5. But first let’s put it to use in some cases in which, unlike the ones we’ve considered so far, it’s not obvious what a judgment’s epistemic ground might be.

3. Putting the alt-ground test to use 1: Chicken Sexers
Chicken sexers are able to sort female from male chicks, but (supposedly) without being able to point to any observable features which differentiate chicks of different sexes. If chicken sexers’ judgments about the sex of chicks are epistemically grounded, then these grounds are hidden – it is not obvious what they are.

But do chicken sexers’ chick sex judgments have epistemic grounds? Let’s see whether the alt-ground test can give us an answer. Consider:

**Case 4**

**Actual world 4:**

Silvan, a world-class chicken sexer, is hard at work sorting chicks. He sorts chicks 1 to 20, in the process of which judging that chick 17 is female.

Can we construct a conceivable scenario in which Silvan’s judgment about chick 17 has an obvious epistemic ground? Yes:

**Test world 4:**

Silvan, a world-class chicken sexer, is on his break and hasn’t yet sorted chick 17. He is told by Dave, a sincere and trustworthy chicken zoologist who has DNA tested chick 17, that chick 17 is female. Silvan judges on this basis that chick 17 is female.

I will consider the conclusion we can draw from the fact that Silvan’s judgment in Actual world 4 passes the test in a moment. But first let’s see what the test ought to tell us.

I think it’s very plausible that Silvan’s judgment in Actual world 4 is – somehow – epistemically grounded. For it is hard (impossible?) to understand Silvan’s highly reliable ability to sort chicks unless we imagine that there is some way in which he manages to distinguish them by their sex. Chicken sexers are not gods, or wizards, but ordinary human beings who have developed a discriminatory capacity which most of us lack, but which is in a sense perfectly every-day. It is plausible, perhaps mandatory, to think that what distinguishes Silvan from someone who lacks this capacity is his sensitivity to the presence or absence of some feature which differentiates the females from the males (even if he can’t describe this feature). And thinking of Silvan in this way is tantamount to thinking of his judgment that chick 17 is female as being epistemically grounded on (his sensitivity to) the presence or absence of this feature, whatever it might be.

What does the test tell us? We might initially think that it tells us that, because the situation in Test world 4 is conceivable, Silvan’s judgment that chick 17 is female in Actual world 4 is epistemically grounded.

But this isn’t right. For the test won’t let us infer from a judgment’s passing it to its being epistemically grounded. This is easy to see. If Silvan had simply guessed that chick 17 was female, his judgment would not be epistemically grounded. Yet this judgment would pass the alt-ground test.
test, for we can easily imagine a case in which this very judgment could have been epistemically grounded – the situation in Test world 4 is a case in point.

To clarify, then, the test only lets us infer from a judgment’s not passing to its not being epistemically grounded. It doesn’t let us infer in the other direction. So all we can say is that it is consistent with Silvan’s judgment’s passing the test, that it is epistemically grounded. And we said above that this is a plausible result.

Consequently, the alt-ground test gives us a good result in this case, albeit by failing to tell us that Silvan’s judgment is not epistemically grounded, rather than by telling us that it is.

4. Putting the alt-ground test to use 2: Mental State Self-Ascriptions

In §1 I gave some examples designed to show that the alt-ground test gives us the expected result in cases where the identity of a judgment’s epistemic ground is already known. In §2 we applied the test to a case in which the identity of a judgment’s epistemic ground is not known – at least in which it is not known prior to doing some philosophical work, and I suggested that the test gives us a plausible result.

In many ways, our judgments about our own mental states look a lot like Silvan’s judgment about the sex of chick 17. I judge that I want a chai latte, and it’s not obvious to me what my epistemic ground is for this judgment. So we might expect my judgment that I want a chai latte also to pass the test, consistently with its being epistemically grounded. But interestingly, applying the alt-ground test suggests that the noted similarity disguises a deeper difference. Consider:

**Case 5**

**Actual world 5:**

Surveying the menu at Caffe Nero, I judge that **I want a chai latte**

Can we conceive of my judgment being epistemically grounded in some particular obvious way?

Consider:

**Test world 5:**

*I am told by Francesca that **I want a chai latte**, and judge on this basis that I want a chai latte*

Is this conceivable?

It’s certainly conceivable that Francesca might *say to me* that I want a *chai latte*. But in order for my judgment in **Actual world 5** to pass the alt-ground test, **Test world 5** must be thought of as a case in which my judgment is based on Francesca’s testimony. And I think this is hard to make sense of.
Basing a judgment that \( p \) on someone’s testimony that \( p \) is a matter of taking the fact that they tell you that \( p \) as on its own a reason to accept that \( p \).\(^4\) This is what we found in the above uncontroversial cases of basing a judgment on testimony. In *Test world 4*, Silvan judged that chick 17 was female on the basis of taking Dave at his word, and in *Actual world 2*, I took Francesca at her word in judging that she wanted a chai latte. We can test this by considering how our judges would respond if our testifiers had testified differently. If Dave had told Silvan that chick 17 was male, or if Francesca had told me that she didn’t want a chai latte, Silvan and I would have happily judged accordingly. But it’s hard to make sense of a situation in which I would happily take Francesca at her word, regardless of whether she told me that I did, or that I didn’t, want a chai latte.

This puts pressure on the conceivability of the situation described in *Test world 5*. What it seems to suggest is that to the extent that we can make sense of there being a role for Francesca’s *saying to me that* that I want a chai latte, this role is as a *prompt* rather than as an *epistemic ground*. What she says might make me *consider* whether I want a chai latté, and lead to me judging accordingly. But we are not here conceiving of this judgment as epistemically grounded on Francesca’s *say-so*: it’s hard to think of Francesca’s *saying to me that* I want a chai latte as testimony to the effect that I want one.

But aren’t there cases in which we do need to rely on others in order to find out about our own mental states? The idea of needing one’s psychotherapist to tell one what mental state one (perhaps in addition to on known facts about their own behavioural tendencies, patterns of emotional reaction and so on) is often appealed to in this connection.

A very general strategy for designing test-cases for mental state self-ascriptive judgments suggests itself: for any actual-world mental state self-ascription, we can build a test-world in which the judgment is grounded on the testimony of one’s psychotherapist. It might be suggested that the situation described in *Test world 5* is not conceivable, and suggested that a psychotherapist case stands a better chance of helping us see how my judgment in *Actual world 5* might pass the alt-judgment test.

But if anything, it’s even harder to conceive of my needing to be told by *my psychotherapist* that I want a chai latte, then of my needing to be told by Francesca. The thought that, at the counter at Caffe Nero, and unsure of my preferences, I might ring up my analyst to find out, is clearly absurd. We think of psychotherapists as in a better position to know about certain of their clients’ mental states (granting that this is the best model to think of the psychotherapeutic situation, which is itself not clear), but not *all* of their mental states. And the mental states of S’s which S’s psychotherapist is likely to be thought of as in a better position to know about than is S, tend to be the ones we are apt to label ‘unconscious’, so precisely *not* those which an account of psychological self-knowledge is concerned with.

5. An Initial Conclusion

\(^4\) This should be distinguished from the – contentious – claim that the *fact that someone tells one that p* is generally enough on its own to justify accepting that \( p \). The claim I am making is just that *accepting someone’s testimony that p* just is taking it that *their having said that p* is a reason to accept it.
The alt-ground test is supposed to be a very general test for whether or not a given judgment is somehow epistemically grounded. It abstracts away from the details of what a judgment’s epistemic ground might be, in various ways:

**First**, the test abstracts away from the exact content of a judgment’s epistemic grounds, because it doesn’t seek to tell us what grounds a given actual-world judgment has, it only tells us that it has some epistemic ground.

**Second**, and for the same reason, it abstracts away from the type of epistemic ground an actual-world judgment has, that is, whether a judgment is grounded in perception, inference, testimony, or in some other way. And as we saw in §1, we can apply the test to both judgments with *a priori* and those with *a posteriori* grounds.

**Third**, it abstracts away from the question of whether a judgment’s ground is best thought of on an internalist or an externalist picture of justification, as we saw in §2. We can grant for the sake of argument that Silvan’s actual-world judgment in Case 4 is most naturally thought of as inaccessible to him, and our test was usefully applied here for exactly this reason – it enabled us to conclude what seemed plausible, that although it’s not obvious what it might be, Silvan’s actual-world judgment that chick 17 is female is somehow epistemically grounded.

Because it abstracts away from the details of a judgment’s epistemic grounds (if any), the alt-ground test can be applied to mental state self-ascriptions independently of canvassing the various options for thinking about how mental state self-ascriptions are supposed to be epistemically grounded. And this means that we can use the alt-ground test as a test of the viability of the orthodox strategy for understanding self-knowledge, without needing to consider how plausible any particular version of this strategy might be.

The considerations in the previous section give us an initial reason to reject the orthodox strategy for thinking about self-knowledge: that strategy starts from the hypothesis that our mental state self-ascriptions have hidden epistemic grounds, and then tries to explain what these might be. But the alt-ground test tells us that these judgments don’t have epistemic grounds, hidden or otherwise.

I have yet to consider an objection to the alt-ground test. I will do so in the final section. The objection will give us a good reason to weaken the conclusion just stated, but this weakened conclusion will remain problematic for the orthodox view.

### 6. An Objection and A Response

The objector grants that the alt-ground test applies rather generally to epistemically grounded judgments, but denies that it can be used to test for whether mental state self-ascriptions are epistemically grounded. Mental state self-ascriptions, the thought goes, are an *exception to the applicability* of the test.

Without an explanation of why mental-state self-ascriptions are a special case, this objection will look hopelessly *ad hoc*. But the objector is likely to suggest that we already know that mental states self-
ascriptions have a special kind of ground. Why not just add that part of this specialness is embodied in the fact that unlike our judgments about matters 'outside of us', there is only one epistemic route to making judgments about our own mental states. (This shouldn’t be particularly surprising since we started by pointing out that mental state self-ascriptions don’t seem to be epistemically grounded in any of the usual ways.) Because mental state self-ascriptions are necessarily grounded in whatever special way they are, it’s no wonder they wouldn’t pass the test. Either the test is a bad one, or it’s a good one generally, but is inapplicable to the special case of mental state self-ascriptions.

To answer this objection, let’s start by considering the principles which might explain why the test is applicable, and why it gives the right results, when this is uncontroversially the case.

A natural thought is that the alt-ground test works because the epistemic ground for a judgment that $p$ must be something other than (or something which has a content other that) $p$. That is: the contents of the ground and the content of the judgment grounded must be distinct. Call this the distinctness claim. The distinctness claim entails that we can drive a conceptual wedge between a judgment’s being somehow epistemically grounded, and its being epistemically grounded in the particular way it is in fact epistemically grounded. And this is just what the alt-ground test asks us to do.

The distinctness claim looks plausible because denying it would entail that “Why accept that $p$?” or “How do you know that $p$?” can be appropriately responded to with “Because $p$!” But we don’t think that this is an appropriate response. “Because $p$!” merely re-expresses the initial judgment which gave rise to epistemic query.

The thought so far is that the alt-ground test tracks the distinctness of epistemic ground and grounded judgment.

Granting that mental state self-ascriptions are exceptions in being exempt to the alt-ground test, then, seems to be suggesting that mental state self-ascriptions are exceptions to the distinctness claim: the alt-ground test doesn’t apply to mental-state self-ascriptions because these are grounded in the very facts answerable to their contents. More concretely: my judgment that I want a chai latte is grounded in the fact that I want one, so we can’t here prise apart the situation of my judging that I want a chai latte from the situation of its having the very epistemic ground it has, which is what the alt-ground test requires us to do.\(^5\)

I am happy to grant the thought that if our mental states self-ascriptive judgments are epistemically grounded, then they are grounded on the very facts they concern. But this doesn’t help the orthodox account of self-knowledge.

For whichever way we go on the question of whether mental state self-ascriptions are plausibly exceptions to the distinctness claim, we have come a long way from the idea that mental state self-ascriptions have hidden epistemic grounds, that they are grounded on a particular reason to think them

\(^5\) An account like this is given by Peacocke, and O’Brien.
true, (and/) or a particular method of belief-formation. If mental state self-ascriptions are not exceptions to the distinctness claim, then they are epistemically ungrounded, because they are subject to the alt-ground test, and they fail it. Whereas if mental state self-ascriptions are exceptions to the distinctness claim, so that they are not subject to the alt-ground test, then they are grounded on the very facts they concern. But to say that my judgment that I want a chai latte is grounded on the very fact that I want one is not to think of it as having a hidden epistemic ground. For it is not hidden to me that I want a chai latte. On the contrary, this is – we have been assuming – something that I know.

References