

***Clarifying the Dependence Condition: A Reply to Benjamin McCraw’s, “The Nature of Epistemic Trust”***

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Much of what we come to believe is based on trusting the communication of others. It would, therefore, be helpful to better understand the nature of this sort of trust. Benjamin McCraw offers one very clear and well-argued account in his, “The Nature of Epistemic Trust.” McCraw claims that a hearer or audience (H) places epistemic trust (ET) in a person or speaker (S) that some proposition (p) is true if and only if:

1. H believes that p;
  2. H takes S to communicate that p;
  3. H depends upon S’s (perceived) communication for H’s belief that p;
- and
4. H sees S as epistemically well-placed with respect to p. (McCraw, 13).

McCraw arrives at this account of epistemic trust by building upon a philosophical consensus of what trust, in general, involves, and then by arguing that his account is able to explain our judgments about those cases where we think epistemic trust occurs and when it is absent. In general, I agree with McCraw’s approach and with much of his account of epistemic trust. Indeed, I learned much from his article; however, I have also come to the conclusion that his third condition on epistemic trust—the dependence condition—requires reinterpretation.

McCraw explains the dependence condition as follows:

Depending upon someone for some belief means that I am not in the proper epistemic position with respect to that belief myself. This means that (3) will entail that H does not have conclusive or sufficient evidence (or grounds in general) for his belief that p without S’s (perceived) communication. S does cause H’s belief, but dependence is not mere causality (McCraw 10).

Notice that in this passage McCraw makes 2 distinct claims:

1. Epistemic trust involves some sort of epistemic *lack* on the part of the one who trusts, and;
2. The person who is trusted *causes* the one who trusts to believe that p.

McCraw supports the dependence condition by noting that it is commonly recognized that trust in non-epistemic situations requires dependence or reliance. He writes, for instance, “Baier explicitly links trust and reliance, even though the former requires more than the latter” (McCraw, 4). And this dependence relation helps explain Baier’s claim that trust involves vulnerability and risk. “For instance, if I rely upon Jones to water my garden while on vacation, I am both risking the health of my poor, sun-scorched plants as well as making my property vulnerable to Jones’s failure” (McCraw, 4). Moreover, McCraw supports the dependence-condition in epistemic situations with an appeal to

examples. For instance, he recalls Anscombe's example where "a friend tells you that Napoleon lost at the battle of Waterloo. You believe what your friend says ... but, and here is the vital part, you do not believe *in* your friend for this belief because you already know what s/he told you" (McCraw, 2-3). As your friend did not cause you to have the Waterloo belief, McCraw claims that you do not epistemically trust your friend for this belief.

So it looks like the dependence-condition is both well-motivated and secure. Yet there are cases that bring this condition into question. First consider a non-epistemic case. Suppose your 20 year-old child is choosing whether to continue her university studies or to take some time off to work and travel. When asked what you think of her decision, you sincerely claim that you *trust* her to make a good decision. Here it seems that we have a case of trust without there being dependence in the sense of reliance that Baier and others emphasize. And so it looks like generalized accounts of trust that claim that trust *requires* dependence (at least, in the sense of reliance) are mistaken. This observation is relevant in that part of McCraw's argumentative strategy is to motivate his account of epistemic trust by drawing on philosophical accounts of non-epistemic trust. But if the accounts of trust that he is drawing on are themselves questionable, then this particular strain of argument won't do much work to support his view of epistemic trust.

Of even more direct concern, however, is that there are counterexamples to McCraw's understanding of the dependence-condition that he claims to be involved in epistemic trust. To see this, first consider a case where you watched an *entire* baseball game on TV and as a result you believe that your home team won the game. Suppose your spouse also watched the game, and then s/he tells you that the home team won. I agree with McCraw's analysis that in such a case you believe what your spouse tells you, but you do not epistemically trust your spouse for this belief.

Here 2 things are present, she did not cause you to believe the home team won, and you have no reason to think that you have any gap in your grounds for believing that your home team won. But now modify the example slightly. Suppose that your team is leading by 7 runs; it is the final inning of the game; there are 2 outs; and you decide to turn off the TV and go to sleep. In the morning you wake up believing that your team won the game. Your spouse, who watched the *entire* game, then tells you that your team won. Now in this case, it seems clear that you epistemically trust in your spouse for the belief that your team won the game, even though you already believed what she told you.

If this is right, then causing the belief that p is not necessary for epistemic trust. Rather what seems relevant is that you realized that you believed that you had less than sufficient grounds for complete confidence in your belief, and that you viewed your spouse as being in a position to further support your belief. Here is another case that confirms the point that the dependence-condition should not be read as requiring the 2 conditions that McCraw endorses. Suppose that you are a researcher, and that you have completed a rather rigorous study that leads you to conclude that x is the case. You publish your results. You *believe* that x is the case. Other researchers then take up the task of performing further, related studies to see if they can confirm your findings. Eventually, another research group publishes an article describing their study and

confirming that they too find that *x* is the case. Although this article does not cause you to believe that *x* is the case—for you already believed that—it increases your confidence in your belief. Here too we have a clear case where there is epistemic trust in another without it being the case that the one who trusted causes the one who trusts to have some belief.

If I am right, we need to reinterpret the dependence condition so that it drops the requirement that epistemic trust requires that the trusted causes the one who trusts to believe that *p*. What about McCraw’s other part of the dependence condition: this is the claim that epistemic trust requires that the one who trusts “does not have conclusive or sufficient evidence (or grounds in general) for his belief that *p*”? This too does not seem quite right.<sup>1</sup> For consider a revised version of my baseball story.

Suppose that when you turned off the TV with your team comfortably in the lead, you thought there were only 2 outs in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning when in fact there were 3 outs and the game was over. So now you go to bed believing that your team won the game. The next day your spouse who you think watched the entire game confirms your belief that your team won the game. Here you surely epistemically trust your spouse that your team won the game, even though you already had sufficient evidence for that belief. If this is right, then an epistemic gap need not be present for one to epistemically trust another; rather, what seems to be relevant is that you *think* there is an epistemic gap in the grounds for your belief, a gap that you think the one you trust can help bridge.

To conclude, let’s return to McCraw’s necessary and sufficient conditions for epistemic trust. “H places ET in a S that *p* iff:

1. H believes that *p*;
2. H takes S to communicate that *p*;
3. H depends upon S’s (perceived) communication for H’s belief that *p*,  
and;
4. H sees S as epistemically well-placed with respect to *p*.” (McCraw, 13).

My suggestion has been that we accept this analysis of epistemic trust, but that we move away from McCraw’s interpretation of (3). McCraw reads 3 as involving 2 conditions: that S caused H to believe that *p*, and that H lacked conclusive grounds for believing that *p* without S’s communication. I have suggested that neither of these conditions is necessary for epistemic trust; instead, I have suggested that we drop the causal condition, and we replace the condition that H lacks conclusive grounds for the belief that *p* with the condition that H *thinks* that s/he lacks sufficient grounds for the belief that *p*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This point was suggested to me by Patrick Findler.

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## References

McCraw, Benjamin W. “The Nature of Epistemic Trust.” *Social Epistemology* (2015): 1-18. doi: 10.1080/02691728.2014.971907.