

7. GETTIEROLOGY

The problem: S knows that p if and only if _____. Fill in the blank. An interesting strategy in itself, and one that might help with the challenge of skepticism. (How can we be sure what we know until we know what knowledge is?)

One natural strategy is to look for necessary conditions—conditions such that S doesn't know unless they hold—and hope that eventually, the necessary conditions taken together add up to a sufficient condition—a condition that such that S cannot fail to know if it holds.

How to identify a necessary condition for knowledge? Look for a case where

- (1) S doesn't know,
- (2) the reason S doesn't know is that the condition doesn't hold
- (3) one can't "make" S know without changing the case so that it does hold

Susan does not know the MIT Corporation is in revolt. Why not? Because it isn't! To "fix" the case we need to suppose the MIT Corporation is in revolt. So one necessary condition looks to be this: p is really true.

Now let's suppose that the MIT Corporation is in revolt. Susan still doesn't know this, because she has no beliefs about it. To "fix" the case so Sally does know, we need to imagine her believing the MIT Corporation is in revolt. So another necessary condition is S believes that p.

What if she does believe it, and it's true? Can we develop the case so she still doesn't know? Maybe it was a lucky guess, or she read it in a fortune cookie, etc. So a third necessary C seems to be S is justified in believing that p.

These three conditions look at first glance like enough. It looks like we fill in the blank as follows: p is true, S believes it, and S is justified in believing it. That's the justified true belief (JTB) analysis of knowledge. Nobody saw much of a problem with it between Plato and 1963, when a counterexample was found by Edmund Gettier:

Smith has strong evidence for the proposition that Jones owns a Ford. ... Jones has at all times in the past within Smith's memory owned a car, and always a Ford, and that Jones has just offered Smith a ride while driving a Ford. Let us imagine, now, that Smith has another friend, Brown, of whose whereabouts he is totally ignorant. Smith selects three place names quite at random and constructs the following three propositions:

- (a) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Boston.
- (b) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona.
- (c) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Brest-Litovsk.

Each of these propositions is entailed by Jones owns a Ford. Imagine that Smith realizes [this] and proceeds to accept [(a), (b), and (c)] Smith has correctly inferred [all three] from a proposition for which he has strong evidence. Smith is therefore completely justified in believing each of these three propositions, Smith, of course, has no idea where Brown is.

But imagine now that two further conditions hold. First Jones does not own a Ford, but is at present driving a rented car. And secondly, by the sheerest coincidence, and entirely unknown to Smith, [Barcelona] happens really to be the place where Brown is. If these two conditions hold, then Smith does not know that (b) is true, even though (i) (b) is true, (ii) Smith believes that (b) is true, and (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (b) is true (Gettier, IJTBK?, with minor adjustments as indicated)

Other simpler examples: Russell's station clock.

Initial response: A fourth condition is needed. What should it be? Any suggestions? It had better not be trivial: one is only justified when one knows.

Radical response: This fourth condition should replace the third; justification is not needed.

The radical response has one large side-benefit. The skeptic challenges our knowledge on the ground that we're not justified. If we don't have to be justified, maybe the skeptic will go away.

NOZICK'S TRACKING THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE (SIMPLIFIED)

S knows that p iff

Truth: p

Belief: S believes that p

Sensitivity: S would not have believed that p, had it not been true that p.

= If it had not been true that p, S would not have believed that p.

Distinguish counterfactual conditionals (If it had been the case that p, it would have been the case that q) from material conditionals (If p then q). 'If Oswald didn't shoot Kennedy, someone else did' (material). 'If Oswald hadn't shot Kennedy, someone else would have' (counterfactual).

Counterfactuals are (roughly) true iff the closest possible world in which the antecedent (the 'if' part) holds, is one in which the consequent (the 'then' part) holds. Note: they are badly named. The antecedent doesn't have to be counter to fact, though typically one would only assert them if the truth of the antecedent were not established.

So, sensitivity holds if in the closest possible world in which the thing known is false is a world in which the subject doesn't believe it.

Does this help with Gettier examples? Easy: Russell's clock example. Harder: Gettier. Would I still have believed (b) if were false, because Brown was not in Barcelona?

Does it help with skepticism? Distinguish ordinary knowledge (I have a hand) from anti-skeptical knowledge (I am not a handless brain in a vat). The skeptic is right that I lack anti-skeptical knowledge. I don't know I'm not a brain in a vat—for although I believe I am not, and it's true, the belief isn't sensitive. I would still have the belief even if it were false.

But the skeptic is mistaken if she thinks this deprives me of ordinary knowledge. My belief that I have a hand is sensitive; had I been without a hand, that would have been because of an accident or the like, which I would certainly have noticed! (That's the closest possible world.)

A surprising conclusion: closure for known entailment fails.

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