Contemporary Epistemology Discussions

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The Analysis of Knowledge

For any person, there are some things they know, and some things they don't. What exactly is the difference? What does it take to know something? It's not enough just to believe it—we don't know the things we're wrong about. Knowledge seems to be more like a way of getting at the truth. The analysis of knowledge concerns the attempt to articulate in what exactly this kind of "getting at the truth" consists.

More particularly, the project of analysing knowledge is to state conditions that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for propositional knowledge, thoroughly answering the question, what does it take to know something? By "propositional knowledge", we mean knowledge of a proposition—for example, if Susan knows that Alyssa is a musician, she has knowledge of the proposition that Alyssa is a musician. Propositional knowledge should be distinguished from knowledge of "acquaintance", as obtains when Susan knows Alyssa. The relation between propositional knowledge and the knowledge at issue in other "knowledge" locutions in English, such as knowledge-where ("Susan knows where she is") and especially knowledge-how ("Susan knows how to ride a bicycle") is subject to some debate (see Stanley 2011 and his opponents discussed therein).

The propositional knowledge that is the analysandum of the analysis of knowledge literature is paradigmatically expressed in English by sentences of the form "S knows that p", where "S" refers to the knowing subject, and "p" to the proposition that is known. A proposed analysis consists of a statement of the following form: S knows that p if and only if j, where j indicates the analysans: paradigmatically, a list of conditions that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for S to have knowledge that p.

It is not enough merely to pick out the actual extension of knowledge. Even if, in actual fact, all cases of S knowing that p are cases of j, and all cases of the latter are cases of the former, j might fail as an analysis of knowledge. For example, it might be that there are possible cases of knowledge without j, or vice versa. A proper analysis of knowledge should at least be a necessary truth. Consequently, hypothetical thought experiments provide appropriate test cases for various analyses, as we shall see below.

Even a necessary biconditional linking knowledge to some state j would probably not be sufficient for an analysis of knowledge, although just what more is required is a matter of some controversy. According to some theorists, to analyze knowledge is literally to identify the

components that make up knowledge—compare a chemist who analyzes a sample to learn its chemical composition. On this interpretation of the project of analyzing knowledge, the defender of a successful analysis of knowledge will be committed to something like the metaphysical claim that what it is for S to know p is for some list of conditions involving S and p to obtain. Other theorists think of the analysis of knowledge as distinctively conceptual—to analyse knowledge is to limn the structure of the concept of knowledge. On one version of this approach, the concept knowledge is literally composed of more basic concepts, linked together by something like Boolean operators. Consequently, an analysis is subject not only to extensional accuracy, but to facts about the cognitive representation of knowledge and other epistemic notions. In practice, many epistemologists engaging in the project of analyzing knowledge leave these metaphilosophical interpretive questions unresolved; attempted analyses, and counterexamples thereto, are often proposed without its being made explicit whether the claims are intended as metaphysical or conceptual ones. In many cases, this lack of specificity may be legitimate, since all parties tend to agree that an analysis of knowledge ought at least to be extensionally correct in all metaphysically possible worlds. As we shall see, many theories have been defended and, especially, refuted, on those terms.

The attempt to analyze knowledge has received a considerable amount of attention from epistemologists, particularly in the late 20th Century, but no analysis has been widely accepted. Some contemporary epistemologists reject the assumption that knowledge is susceptible to analysis.

Reliabilist Epistemology

Reliabilism is an approach to epistemology that emphasizes the truth-conduciveness of a belief-forming process, method, or other epistemologically relevant factors. The reliability theme appears in theories of knowledge, of justification, and of evidence. “Reliabilism” is sometimes used broadly to refer to any theory that emphasizes truth-getting or truth indicating properties. More commonly it is used narrowly to refer to process reliabilism about justification. This entry discusses reliabilism in both broad and narrow senses, but concentrates on the theory of justification.

Reliability Theories of Knowledge

It is generally agreed that a person S knows a proposition P only if S believes P and P is true. Since all theories accept this knowledge-truth connection, reliabilism as a distinctive approach to knowledge is restricted to theories that involve truth-promoting factors above and beyond the truth of the target proposition. What this additional truth-link consists in, however, varies widely.

Perhaps the first formulation of a reliability account of knowing appeared in a brief discussion by F.P. Ramsey (1931), who said that a belief is knowledge if it is true, certain and obtained by a reliable process. This attracted no attention at the time and apparently did not influence reliability theories of the 1960s, 70s, or 80s. Another early reliability-type theory was Peter Unger's (1968) proposal that S knows that P just in case it is not at all accidental that S is right about its being the case that P. S's being right about P amounts to S's believing truly that P. Its not being accidental that S is right about P amounts to there being something in S's situation that makes it highly probable that S would be right. David Armstrong (1973) offered an analysis of non-inferential knowledge that explicitly used the term "reliable". He drew an analogy between a thermometer that reliably indicates the temperature and a belief that reliably indicates the truth. According to this account, a non-inferential belief qualifies as knowledge if the belief has properties that are nomically sufficient for its truth, i.e., guarantees its truth via laws of nature. This can be considered a reliable-indicator theory of knowing. Alvin Goldman offered his first formulation of a reliable process theory of knowing—as a refinement of the causal theory of knowing—in a short paper on innate knowledge (Goldman 1975).

In the 1970s and 1980s several subjunctive or counterfactual theories of knowing were offered with reliabilist contours. The first was Fred Dretske's "Conclusive Reasons" (1971), which proposed that S's belief that P qualifies as knowledge just in case S believes P because of reasons he possesses that would not obtain unless P were true. In other words, S's reasons—the way an object appears to S, for example—are a reliable indicator of the truth of P. This idea was elaborated in Dretske's Knowledge and the Flow of Information (1981), which linked knowing to getting information from a source through a reliable channel. Meanwhile, Goldman also proposed a kind of counterfactual reliability theory in "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge" (1976). This theory developed the idea of knowledge excluding "relevant alternatives", an idea already adumbrated in Dretske's "Epistemic Operators" (1970). In Goldman's treatment, a person perceptually knows that P just in case (roughly) she arrives at a belief in P based on a perceptual experience that enables her to discriminate the truth of P from all relevant alternatives. On this approach, S's knowing that P is compatible with there being "radical" (hence irrelevant) situations—for example, brain-in-a-vat situations—in which P would be false although S has the same experience and belief. Gail Stine (1976) explored this approach with respect to knowledge, skepticism, and deductive closure (i.e., the principle that one knows all that is implied—or all that one knows to be implied—by what one knows).

Robert Nozick (1981) proposed a theory with similar contours, a theory he called a "tracking" theory. In addition to truth and belief, Nozick's conditions for knowledge were: (1) if P were not true then S would not believe that P, and (2) if P were true, S would believe that P. The first of the two tracking conditions was subsequently called the "sensitivity" requirement. A number of counterexamples have been produced to this condition (see especially DeRose 1995). A similar tracking condition that has gained attention recently is a "safety" condition. Safety can be explained in slightly different formulations (see Ernest Sosa 1996, 2000; Timothy Williamson 2000; Duncan Pritchard 2005), including "if S believes that P, then P would not easily have been false", or "in all of the nearest worlds where S believes that P, P is true". Williamson classifies the safety approach as a species of reliability theory (2000: 123–124).

Reliability theories are partly motivated by the threat of skepticism. It is natural to think that if you know that P then in some sense you "can't be wrong" about P. But what is the relevant sense of "can't"? Does it mean that your evidence must logically preclude the possibility of error? If so, very few propositions would be known. Reliability theories, in their various ways, propose weaker but still substantial senses of "can't be wrong". For example, the relevant-alternatives theory allows that one can know that P even if there are logically possible situations in which one's evidence is the same but P is false. But it insists that there be no relevant possible situations in which one's evidence is the same but P is false. Such an account is not so seriously threatened by skepticism.

Reliability theories of knowledge continue to appeal to epistemologists, and permutations abound. The reliability theories presented above focus on modal reliability, on getting truth and avoiding error in possible worlds with specified relations to the actual one. They also focus on local reliability, that is, truth-acquisition in scenarios linked to the specific scenario in question as opposed to truth-getting by a process or method over a wide range of cases. Other reliabilisms focus on global reliability: the reliability of the type of process or method used across all or many of its applications. Goldman's Epistemology and Cognition (1986) combines both local and global reliability in its account of knowledge.