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VI. WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW WON'T HURT YOU?

JOHN A. BARKER

I

IF you know something, then what you don't know won't hurt you—there is always a way of coming to know what you don't know without sacrificing the knowledge you already have. Knowledge, we might say, is of its very nature indefinitely extendible.¹ At first blush there may appear to be exceptions to this principle. Tom Grabit stole a book from the library, and Smith knows it, for he knows Tom well and he witnessed the foul deed. One thing Smith doesn't know is that Tom's mother has averred that Tom has an identical twin brother who was in the library at the time. But another thing Smith doesn't know is that Tom's mother is demented, and the twin is only a figment of her imagination.² Is it true that what Smith doesn't know won't hurt him? Could he somehow acquire knowledge that Tom's mother said what she said without suffering the consequence of having his belief that Tom stole the book disqualified as knowledge? Yes, simply by acquiring the additional knowledge as part of the whole story, including the facts about the woman's deranged mind. In getting the apparently contravening evidence as part of the whole truth of the matter, Smith could preserve his original knowledge that Tom stole the book.

Can this extendibility feature of knowledge be incorporated into a justificationist analysis of knowing? Let us hypothesize that a justified

belief in a true proposition p qualifies as knowledge if and only if what isn't known won't hurt, i.e., if and only if there is some way that any other true proposition besides p could come to be justifiably believed without destruction of the original justification for believing p . In other words, one who justifiably believes a conclusion has knowledge just in case there is no truth one could not somehow learn while still justifiably believing the conclusion solely on the same basis as before. When the justification for p is thus compatible in principle with justified belief in every other true proposition, we can say that the justification for p is *absolute*. Knowledge, according to this theory, is absolutely justified true belief.³

The absolute justification theory gains intuitive appeal from the following kind of consideration. If I believe that I know that Tom stole the book, then I believe that at least in the long run the evidence would support my view; any evidence that may crop up against Tom's stealing the book could, I feel sure, eventually be discredited by more evidence. According to the theory under consideration, believing that one knows entails believing that one's justification is in principle compatible with justified belief in every other true proposition. Hence, the theory succeeds in accounting for the special kind of confidence associated with my believing that I know that Tom stole the book.

¹ Risto Hilpinen, in "Knowledge and Justification," *Ajatus*, vol. 33 (1971), pp. 7–39, discussed at some length a stronger version of the extendibility of knowledge thesis, a version stating in effect that no matter how one comes to know what one doesn't know one's existing knowledge is preserved (see pp. 25 ff.). In this connection, see also: Jaakko Hintikka, *Knowledge and Belief* (Ithica, 1962), pp. 20–21; Gilbert Harman, *Thought* (Princeton, 1973), Ch. 9; and Marshall Swain, "Epistemic Defeasibility," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 11 (1974), pp. 15–25, pp. 19 ff.

² This example, which was discussed by Hilpinen in relation to the extendibility thesis, is borrowed from Keith Lehrer and Thomas Paxson, "Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 66 (1969), pp. 225–237, see p. 228.

³ The existing theories most similar to this theory are those of Peter Klein, "A Proposed Definition of Propositional Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 68 (1971), pp. 471–482, and Risto Hilpinen, *op. cit.* Their theories claim in effect that one's justified true belief qualifies as knowledge if and only if no matter how one attains a justified belief in any other true proposition one's original justification is preserved. For criticisms of these stronger theories, see Swain, *ibid.*, and Keith Lehrer, *Knowledge* (London, 1974), pp. 22 ff. The superiority of the weaker theory is demonstrated in § 4 below.

II

In turning to troublesome cases of knowledge and of ignorance discussed in the literature, we find that the absolute justification theory has a great deal of plausibility. Many of these cases center on justifications involving false assumptions. Smith, justifiably believing that a certain colleague, Jones, owns a Ford, correctly infers that at least one of his colleagues owns a Ford, a proposition Smith thereby acquires justification for believing. It so happens that while this proposition is true (owing to the fact that another colleague, Brown, owns a Ford), the assumption that Jones owns a Ford is false. Despite having a justified belief in the true proposition that at least one of his colleagues owns a Ford, Smith obviously lacks knowledge.⁴ The absolute justification theory can easily handle this case. What Smith doesn't know is that Jones owns no Ford, and this hurts—there is no way that Smith could acquire justification for believing this true proposition without destruction of his original justification for believing that at least one of his colleagues owns a Ford. Even in light of the whole story, which includes the information that Brown owns a Ford, Smith's original justification would remain utterly devastated, despite the fact that in getting the whole story Smith would then have an independent source of knowledge that at least one colleague owns a Ford. To say that Smith's original justification would be destroyed is to say that he could no longer justifiably believe his conclusion solely on the same basis as before. Thus, acquisition of new support for his conclusion could not prevent destruction of his original justification.

The theory, however, is not so restrictive that it requires *all* assumptions to be true. Let us modify the above example and suppose that Smith is also justified in believing the true proposition that Brown owns a Ford. And let us suppose that in addition to drawing his conclusion that at least one colleague owns a Ford from his premiss about Jones, Smith independently draws this conclusion from the premiss that Brown owns a Ford.⁵ This time the falsity

of the assumption about Jones does not prevent Smith from gaining knowledge of his conclusion, and this time the absolute justification theory does not deny Smith knowledge. What Smith doesn't know won't hurt, for the adequacy of his justification for believing his conclusion would be unaffected by acquisition of a justified belief in the true proposition that Jones does not own a Ford. Despite the destruction of a portion of Smith's total justification, enough remains to justify belief in the conclusion.

Some troublesome cases involve false assumptions which are more-or-less implicit. Smith, coming across Jones' valid title to a Ford, acquires a justified belief that Jones owns a Ford, something which is true. What Smith doesn't know is that the title he saw was to a Ford which was recently destroyed by a bomb, and that Jones happened to acquire another Ford in a raffle. Obviously Smith does not have knowledge that Jones owns a Ford.⁶ It would be difficult to maintain that there was any explicit assumption of Smith's that was false. Nevertheless what Smith doesn't know hurts—he could in no way acquire a justified belief in the true proposition that the title he saw was to a car which no longer existed without suffering destruction of his original justification for believing that Jones owns a Ford.

Sometimes assumptions are at most *virtual*. Smith, let us suppose, has various items of evidence that several of his colleagues, Jones, Brown, Black, and White, each own Fords. In each case the evidence is not quite sufficient to justify a belief that the colleague in question owns a Ford. Smith also has some evidence (the fact that Fords are popular cars) that other colleagues besides these four might very well own Fords, but this evidence is not sufficient to justify a conclusion that at least one colleague owns a Ford. Nevertheless *all* of the evidence taken together is sufficient to justify this conclusion, and Smith makes the inference. Unknown to Smith, however, none of the four above-mentioned colleagues owns a Ford. It so happens that Smith's conclusion is true because another colleague, Green, does own a Ford. It is obvious that Smith

⁴ Cf. Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?," *Analysis*, vol. 33 (1963), pp. 121–123.

⁵ Cf. Keith Lehrer, "Knowledge, Truth and Evidence," *Analysis*, vol. 25 (1965), pp. 168–175, p. 170.

⁶ Cf. John Turk Saunders and Narayan Champawat, "Mr. Clark's Definition of 'Knowledge'," *Analysis*, vol. 25 (1969), pp. 8–9, and Brian Skyrms, "The Explication of 'X Knows that p'," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 64 (1967), pp. 373–389, p. 383.

lacks knowledge.⁷ Nevertheless, it would be difficult to maintain that any *actual* assumption of Smith's was false—the false proposition that either Jones or Brown or Black or White owns a Ford constitutes at most what could be called a *virtual* assumption. But the fact remains that what Smith doesn't know hurts, for there is no way he could acquire a justified belief in the true proposition that none of these four colleagues owns a Ford without undermining his original justification for believing his conclusion.

III

In some cases of belief-acquisition a false proposition is involved not as an assumption, but as what can be called a *presupposition*. Consider the following variation on the Grabit story, which we shall dub the Second Version. Having witnessed the theft of the library book, Smith is justified in believing that Tom, whom he knows well, stole the book. What Smith doesn't know, however, is that Tom really does have an identical twin brother who happened to be in the library at the time. In this case, it seems, Smith fails to acquire knowledge that Tom stole the book.⁸ It would be implausible, however, to claim that the proposition that there was no such twin in the vicinity was an *assumption* (implicit or virtual) that Smith made, for the *absence* of belief in this proposition did not in any way affect Smith's concluding that Tom stole the book. It is more appropriate to characterize the proposition as a *presupposition* of Smith's—only the *presence* of belief in the *falsity* of the proposition would have adversely affected Smith's concluding that Tom stole the book.⁹

According to the absolute justification theory, the falsity of Smith's presupposition prevents him from attaining knowledge. There is no way that Smith could acquire justified belief in the fact that Tom's identical twin was in the vicinity without wreaking havoc on his original justifica-

tion for believing that Tom stole the book. At first it may seem that there might be a way. After all, the rest of the story is that the twin was quietly studying epistemology in another part of the library. Perhaps if Smith learned the whole story, including not only the information about the presence of the twin in the vicinity, but also the information about the twin's precise location at the relevant time, then his original justification would not be adversely affected. But this won't wash. Smith's original justification would be rendered inadequate in itself by acquisition of justified belief in the whole story, despite the fact that some of the new information, i.e., that concerning the precise location of the twin, could be used to *supplement* the original evidence in such a way as to "re-justify" the belief that Tom stole the book. The fact remains that upon learning of the presence of the twin in the vicinity, Smith could no longer justifiably believe his conclusion solely on the same basis as before. What Smith doesn't know hurts, and hence the absolute justification theory rightly entails that Smith lacks knowledge.

IV

To see that the falsity of a presupposition does not always prevent one from attaining knowledge, let us return to the First Version of the Grabit story. Smith, who witnessed the crime, is justified in believing that Tom, whom he knows well, stole the book. Tom is indeed the culprit, but unknown to Smith, Tom's mother has averred that Tom has an identical twin brother who was in the library at the time. No doubt if Smith, who had no thoughts at all about such a twin, had believed that Tom's mother said this, he would have at least hesitated to conclude that Tom stole the book. Hence Smith can be said to have *presupposed* that there was no such claim made. But this time the falsity of his presupposition does not prevent his attaining

⁷ This type of example is suggested by considerations advanced by Lehrer in *Knowledge, op. cit.*, pp. 20, 218.

⁸ Cf. Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 474.

⁹ The question of the relevance of such presuppositions to knowledge is closely associated with the question of the relevance of unfavorable evidence which the subject does not possess; the latter is discussed by Ernest Sosa in "Analysis of 'Knowledge that *p*,'" *Analysis*, vol. 25 (1964), pp. 1–8, p. 5, and in "Two Conceptions of Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 57 (1970), pp. 59–66, p. 62; and by Gilbert Harman in "Knowledge, Inference, and Explanation," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 5 (1968), pp. 164–173, pp. 172–173, and in *Thought, op. cit.*, Ch. 9. Related topics are discussed by Fred Dretske in "Epistemic Operators," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 57 (1970), pp. 1007–1023; by Alvin Goldman in "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," presented at the Univ. of Missouri at St. Louis, 1974; and by G. C. Stine in "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure," presented at the 1974 meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division.

knowledge, for the twin is only a fiction of the woman's deranged mind. And the absolute justification theory does not deny Smith knowledge. If Smith should acquire justified belief in the fact that Tom's mother said what she said along with the information about her delusions, his original justification would be preserved intact. The facts about the woman's mental condition render her claim incapable of damaging Smith's justification for believing that Tom stole the book. Upon learning the whole story, Smith could justifiably continue to believe his conclusion solely on the same basis as before. Thus, the absolute justification theory is not so restrictive that it requires all presuppositions to be true.

At this point we should consider the following possible objection. Suppose that it is true that what mothers say in situations like that described above is generally reliable. Now this fact, coupled with the fact that Tom's mother said what she said, has the consequence that Smith does *not* know that Tom stole the book—it is only a felicitous coincidence that Smith's belief is true, and hence he lacks knowledge.¹⁰ But the absolute justification theory fails to deny Smith knowledge, for there is a way, via learning the above-mentioned facts along with the facts about this mother's demented state, that Smith could extend his fund of justified true beliefs without undermining his original justification. Hence, the theory is too weak, as it classifies a case of ignorance as a case of knowledge.

But is this really a case of ignorance?¹¹ Granted, there are, unknown to Smith, some facts which if learned would constitute strong evidence against Tom's being the culprit. This evidence, however, would be misleading evidence; and it could be completely nullified by additional evidence concerning the woman's mental condition. The mere possibility of misleading evidence seems insufficient to prevent Smith's belief from qualifying as knowledge, since the misleading character of the evidence could be discovered by further investigation. The above objection presupposes that one cannot know unless there is no possibility of misleading evidence, i.e., unless there are no true

propositions which would if known constitute strong unfavorable evidence against the true proposition one believes. Such a requirement seems too stringent to accord with the ordinary concept of knowledge. For instance, when one believes that one knows, one does not necessarily believe that no misleading evidence could crop up; one need hold only that *if* apparently contravening evidence does come to light, then this evidence could eventually be nullified by additional evidence. If one is convinced that one knows, then one does not fear the whole truth of the matter, though one might very well fear partial truths. Thus the claim that Smith would fail to attain knowledge in the situation described above rests on an erroneous view concerning the requirements of knowing. The absolute justification theory is correct in according knowledge to Smith.

V

We have seen that with regard to the First Version of the Grabit story, in which it is reasonably clear that Smith attained knowledge, the absolute justification theory is in agreement with preanalytic judgment. And with regard to the Second Version the theory likewise accords with intuition in denying Smith knowledge. By modifying the First Version we can see that as it becomes less clear that Smith attains knowledge, it becomes correspondingly less clear that Smith's justification is absolute. For example, instead of supposing that Tom's mother is demented, let us suppose that she is quite sane, and fabricated the twin story because she wanted to protect Tom, whom she feared might have been the culprit.¹² It is no longer very clear that if Smith should learn of her claim along with the facts about its real source, his original justification would remain unaffected. But neither is it very clear from the intuitive point of view that Smith would have knowledge that Tom stole the book. If we introduce the further supposition that Smith did not himself witness the crime, but learned of it from a newspaper account, we are more strongly inclined to deny that Smith attained knowledge.¹³ At the same time, however,

¹⁰ Cf. Klein, *op. cit.*, pp. 479–480, Footnote 9; and Hilpinen, *op. cit.*, pp. 32 ff.

¹¹ Lehrer, discussing a similar case, argues that knowledge is attained by the subject (see *Knowledge, op. cit.*, pp. 221–222). In this connection see also Swain's discussion of the Rock Throwing Example, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹² Cf. e.g. Sosa, "Two Conceptions of Knowledge," *op. cit.*, p. 62, and Harman, *Thought, op. cit.*, p. 142.

¹³ Cf. e.g. Harman, *ibid.*, pp. 143–144.

we are more strongly inclined to say that in this case Smith's justification is not absolute—if he should acquire a justified belief that Tom's mother said what she said, he would perhaps suffer destruction of his original justification, even if he learned of this claim in conjunction with the facts about its real source. Justification stemming from communication, it seems, is more sensitive to contravening evidence than that attained through perception.

In a similar fashion we can modify the Second Version of the Grabit story to show that as it becomes less clear that Smith failed to attain knowledge, it likewise becomes less clear that Smith's justification would be adversely affected by an expanded fund of justified true beliefs. Instead of supposing that the twin was in the library at the relevant time, let us suppose that he wasn't there because he was involved in an automobile accident on his way to the library. Did Smith fail to attain knowledge that Tom stole the book? Could Smith have learned of the existence and intended destination of the twin without adverse effect on his original justification, provided that he also learned about the accident? Clear-cut answers do not seem available to either question. Let us go on to suppose that the accident occurred a thousand miles away three days prior to the theft, and that the twin was killed in the accident.¹⁴ Again the absolute justification theory accords with intuition—both preanalytic judgment and the theory seem less disposed in this case to condemn Smith to ignorance.

These considerations indicate that the sphere of vagueness of the ordinary term "know" may turn out to coincide with the sphere of vagueness of the term as defined by the absolute justification theory. Such a congruence would constitute additional evidence in favor of the theory.

VI

If knowledge is absolutely justified true belief, then is the skeptic right about the extent of our knowledge—is he justified in believing that we possess little or no knowledge? Typically, the skeptic focuses on certain general presuppositions of our conclusions. For instance, the skeptic may note that in coming to almost any con-

clusion we presuppose that there is not some evil genius manipulating our beliefs, for if we believed there were such a being operating behind the scenes we would hesitate to draw the conclusion. The skeptic inquires as to whether we are justified in believing that this presupposition is true; failing to find sufficient justification to satisfy himself, he concludes that he is justified in believing that we fail to attain knowledge. Now according to the absolute justification theory, we do not attain knowledge unless the above-mentioned presupposition is true. But the theory of knowing the skeptic implicitly appeals to is much more restrictive—according to his theory, even if the presupposition is true, we fail to attain knowledge unless we are *justified* in believing the presupposition.

If we accept the skeptic's theory of knowing, then skepticism may appear to be a reasonable thesis about the extent of our knowledge. Our investigation of the absolute justification theory, however, points to the conclusion that the skeptic's theory is too stringent to constitute an accurate explication of the ordinary concept of knowledge. According to this stringent theory, our presuppositions must be justified as well as true in order for us to have knowledge. But, it seems, the ordinary concept of knowledge requires only that the presuppositions be true. (Indeed, as we have seen in the First Version of the Grabit story, sometimes the downright falsity of a presupposition is incapable of preventing attainment of knowledge.) Whether or not our presuppositions are justifiably believed is a question relevant not to our having knowledge, but to our having knowledge that we have knowledge. The skeptic has no right to assume that we don't know unless we know that we know.

If the skeptic can show that we are not justified in believing the general presuppositions of our conclusions, then he will have shown that we are not justified in believing that we know. But according to the absolute justification theory, he will not have thereby shown that he is justified in believing that we do not know. Although skepticism may turn out to be the truth about knowledge, the absolute justification theory seems to provide no aid or comfort to the skeptic. On the other hand, the theory is not by any means a boon to the dogmatist, as it does not facilitate the dogmatist's task of showing that

¹⁴ Cf. e.g. Harmon, *ibid.*, p. 143, and Goldman's discussion of the Barn Example in *op. cit.*

he is justified in believing that we have a good deal of knowledge. Indeed, the theory seems just right, allowing the skeptic and the dogmatist at least to agree on what it is they disagree about.¹⁵

VII

Knowledge is in principle indefinitely extendible. The absolute justification theory of knowing, which is based on this principle, turns out to exhibit considerable promise as a satisfactory analysis of the ordinary concept of propositional knowledge. Not only can the

theory discriminate between damaging and harmless instances of false assumptions, it can do the same with respect to instances of false presuppositions. The applicability of the concept of knowledge defined by the theory seems clear where the applicability of the ordinary concept of knowledge is clear; and where the one concept is vague, the other is also. Finally, the apparent doctrinal neutrality and pragmatic adequacy of the theory with respect to the perennial quest for the bounds of human knowledge lend strong support to the view that knowledge is absolutely justified true belief.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Cf. Klein, *op. cit.*, pp. 481–482.

¹⁶ I am indebted to Thomas Paxson and Kenneth Collier for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.