RADICAL KNOWLEDGE MINIMALISM

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ABSTRACT: We argue that knowledge doesn't require any of truth, justification, or belief. This is so for four primary reasons. First, each of the three conditions has been subject to convincing counterexamples. In addition, the resultant account explains the value of knowledge, manifests important theoretical virtues (in particular, simplicity), and avoids commitment to skepticism.

KEYWORDS: knowledge minimalism, truth, justification, belief, skepticism

In this short paper we argue that the JTB account of knowledge is false in all its components: knowledge doesn't require any of truth, justification, or belief. You can know that p whether p is true or false, whether p is justified or not, and whether you believe that p or don't. Indeed, knowledge does not require the satisfaction of any substantive conditions whatsoever. In short, you know *W*hatever is *T*rue or *F*alse. Call this the WTF account of knowledge:

(WTF) S knows that p iff p or not-p.

There are four primary arguments for WTF. First, convincing arguments have been mustered against each of the three conditions in the traditional JTB account, and it is time we took those arguments seriously and jointly. Second, WTF explains the value of knowledge. Third, WTF manifests important theoretical virtues. Fourth, WTF avoids what is widely agreed to be an implausible commitment to skepticism. In this paper we present these four arguments and then consider three objections to our project.[1]

Argument 1: The Existing Literature

Allen Hazlett (2010) has argued that knowledge doesn't require truth. Crispin Sartwell ((1991) and (1992)) has argued that knowledge doesn't require justification. Colin Radford (1966) has argued that knowledge doesn't require

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[1] If you're worried that the WTF account is too disjunctive, note that it is roughly equivalent to a non-disjunctive account according to which you know that p iff p has a truth value. This non-disjunctive account allows for truth values other than truth or falsity, but this may even seem to be a virtue of the non-disjunctive account. We leave this issue for more extensive discussions of the WTF account.

belief. They are all correct. Therefore, knowledge doesn't require truth, justification, or belief.

This argument is further strengthened by noting that each view was plausible enough to be published. But consider the following Agglomeration Thesis:

> (Agglomeration) If A was plausible enough to be published and B was plausible enough to be published and C was plausible enough to be published, then A&B&C is plausible enough to be published.

It follows from Agglomeration and the fact that the denial of each of the three JTB conditions was plausible enough to be published, that the conjunction of the denials of the three JTB conditions is plausible enough to be published. We leave the derivation of Agglomeration to the reader.

Argument 2: The Value of Knowledge

In the *Meno*, Plato tentatively suggests that knowledge is especially valuable because it is a particularly stable cognitive attitude. Unlike mere true belief, which is not tied down, knowledge lasts. Timothy Williamson, more recently, has agreed that knowledge is "robust" with respect to "destruction by later evidence" (Williamson 2000 63). When you know something, it is resistant to misleading counterevidence.

The WTF account allows knowledge to be *radically* stable. Not only is knowledge resistant to misleading counterevidence, it survives any evidence entirely – misleading or not.

Argument 3: Theoretical Virtues of WTF

It is a virtue of a theory that it be simple. There is no other theory of knowledge as simple as WTF.

Argument 4: Anti-Skeptical Consequences of WTF

Skepticism is often assumed to be a deal-breaker in contemporary epistemology. Laurence BonJour refers to very strong forms of skepticism as "intellectual suicide" (1998, 5) while David Lewis is even willing to choose fallibilism over the "whirlpool of skepticism" (1996, 550). The primary worry about skepticism is that, if it's true, we don't know anything we take ourselves to know.

WTF has no skeptical consequences. On WTF, you know everything you take yourself to know. You know everything else, as well. WTF is maximally anti-skeptical.

Objections

Objection 1: Self-defeat

The first objection is an *ad hominem*: it's that we – the authors of this paper – do not even believe our conclusion and so, by our own lights, shouldn't be asserting it.

Reply: the norm of assertion is knowledge, not belief. By our own lights (that is, according to WTF), belief is not necessary for knowledge (and nor is truth). WTF itself is either true or false. Therefore, by our own lights, we know that WTF is true. Therefore, by our own lights, we may assert that WTF is true.

Objection 2: Gettier Counterexamples

The second objection directs Gettier counterexamples against WTF. In Gettier counterexamples, your failure to know is not attributable to a failure of belief, truth, or justification. Mustn't, then, there be an additional condition on knowledge – one that we, in arguing for WTF, have not yet ruled out?

Reply: Gettier cases are cases in which you satisfy some conditions on knowledge only as a result of luck. But on WTF, you never only luckily satisfy any conditions on knowledge; you never could have easily failed to satisfy any of the conditions on knowledge. It can't easily be the case that neither p or not-p in possible worlds in which p or not-p. Of course, there are some situations in which you could easily have believed falsely. But because knowledge doesn't require either belief or truth, it is irrelevant that you could have easily believed falsely. Knowledge doesn't require non-lucky satisfaction of conditions that are irrelevant to knowledge.

Objection 3: Traditional Counterexamples

The third objection points to various cases in which it seems that someone fails to know something, whether because what they know is false, they fail to believe it, or they fail to have justification. The WTF account predicts that no one ever fails to know anything. Therefore, any case in which someone fails to know something is a counterexample to the WTF account.

Reply: Sartwell points out that the case for eliminating the justification condition "cannot be refuted by the flick of a counterexample" (1992, 167). The point generalizes.

Of course, we have relied, in small part, on at least one author who resists traditional conditions on knowledge by reference to counterexamples. But all this shows is that all competitor accounts are subject to intuitive counterexamples. We're left to decide among the competitor accounts according to how well they do

on a checklist of desiderata. As argued above, the WTF account does exceedingly well on anti-skeptical criteria, simplicity (and, so, theoretical virtues), and explaining the value of knowledge. It also preserves closure, explains why knowledge is a necessary condition for proper assertion, allows infants and animals to have knowledge, does not require an ideal theory in epistemology, and does not overly intellectualize knowledge. No competitor accounts does as well on all of these criteria.

Brian Weatherson says that a theory can be correct if it does well enough on a variety of theoretical tests to overcome intuitive difficulties with counterexamples. (2003, 10) We concur. This is especially so if all the rival accounts face their own intuitive difficulties. That there may be occasional criteria on which the WTF account fares worse does not alter the fact that the WTF account should be considered an important contender on the epistemological stage. The relative intuitive plausibility of rival accounts is just one small factor among many.

Conclusion

It might be thought that WTF isn't minimal enough. Why restrict knowledge to claims that are either true or false? What of the neither true nor false? Why allow this chauvinism? Should WTF be replaced with the view that S knows whatever is either true or false or neither true nor false?

While we are sympathetic to the possibility of knowledge of the neither true nor false, we think the consequences are implausible. Rocks, words, and incoherent phrases are all neither true nor false, so expanding the domain of knowledge in this way allows knowledge that desktop, knowledge that blue prime number, and knowledge that . This is absurd. As Weatherson notes, "While a theory can be reformist, it cannot be revolutionary" (2003, 8). Therefore, you know all and only what is true or false.[2]

References

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[2] We don't have the resources to exclude an account of knowledge according to which you know that *p* iff *p* is both true and false. Though the simplicity of this account, not to mention the fact that this account explains why knowledge is a rare jewel indeed, tempts us, the complete argument against it would take us beyond the scope of this paper. We leave the maximalist account for future researchers.

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