

Factivity and Epistemic Certainty: A Reply to Sankey

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Abstract: This is a reply to Howard Sankey's comment ("Factivity or Grounds? Comment on Mizrahi") on my paper, "You Can't Handle the Truth: Knowledge = Epistemic Certainty," in which I present an argument from the factivity of knowledge for the conclusion that knowledge is epistemic certainty. While Sankey is right that factivity does not entail epistemic certainty, the factivity of knowledge does entail that knowledge is epistemic certainty.

Keywords: epistemic certainty, factivity, fallibilism, knowledge

I am grateful to Howard Sankey for commenting on my paper, "You Can't Handle the Truth: Knowledge = Epistemic Certainty," in which I present an argument from the factivity of knowledge for the conclusion that knowledge is epistemic certainty.¹ The argument runs as follows:

- (1) If S knows that p on the grounds that e , then p cannot be false given e .
- (2) If p cannot be false given e , then e makes p epistemically certain.
- (3) Therefore, if S knows that p on the grounds that e , then e makes p epistemically certain.²

Sankey argues that it is the notion of grounds that is doing the work in this argument, not the notion of factivity.³ As Sankey puts it:

the argument that Mizrahi presents does not in fact proceed from the factivity of knowledge to knowledge being epistemic certainty. Rather, the argument proceeds from an assumption about the relation between grounds and knowledge to the conclusion about epistemic certainty.⁴

Sankey argues that this argument proceeds from an assumption about grounds, not factivity, because, to say that knowledge is factive is to say that "knowledge requires truth,"⁵ whereas "the claim that knowledge is factive says nothing about a relation between grounds and knowledge."⁶

Now, Sankey is right that, strictly speaking, *factivity* "says nothing about a relation between grounds and knowledge."⁷ But the claim that *knowledge* is factive does say something about a relation between grounds and knowledge. For, just as "knowledge requires truth,"⁸ knowledge also requires justification. Just as it "is not possible to know a proposition if that proposition is

¹ Moti Mizrahi, "You Can't Handle the Truth: Knowledge = Epistemic Certainty," *Logos & Episteme* 10, 2 (2019): 225-227.

² Mizrahi, "You Can't Handle the Truth," 225.

³ Howard Sankey, "Factivity or Grounds? Comment on Mizrahi," *Logos & Episteme* 10, 3 (2019): 333-334.

⁴ Sankey, "Factivity or Grounds?" 333.

⁵ Sankey, "Factivity or Grounds?" 333.

⁶ Sankey, "Factivity or Grounds?" 334.

⁷ Sankey, "Factivity or Grounds?" 334.

⁸ Sankey, "Factivity or Grounds?" 333.

false,”⁹ it is also not possible to know a proposition if that proposition is unjustified. Accordingly, if *S* has no grounds for believing that *p*, then *S* cannot be said to know that *p*. On the other hand, if *S* knows that *p*, then *p* must be not only true but also justified. Therefore, the claim that knowledge is factive does say something about the relation between knowledge and grounds insofar as knowledge requires justification. And justification (i.e., reasons or evidence) is that which makes a proposition epistemically certain because, if *S* knows that *p*, then *p* cannot be false.¹⁰

Nevertheless, I suspect that the argument sketched above can be made without the explicit mention of justification or evidence for *p*, given that knowledge requires justification in much the same way that knowledge requires truth. That is:

- (1) If *S* knows that *p*, then *p* cannot be false.
- (2) If *p* cannot be false, then *p* is epistemically certain.
- (3) Therefore, if *S* knows that *p*, then *p* is epistemically certain.

I think that this argument works just as well as the previous one in showing that knowledge is epistemic certainty. Again, what guarantees the truth of *p*, i.e., what makes it such that *p* cannot be false, is *S*'s justification for *p*; justification that *S* must have if *S* can be said to know that *p*. Since *p* cannot be false because knowledge is factive, it follows that *S*'s justification for *p* must be such that it makes *p* epistemically certain. That is why knowledge = epistemic certainty.

⁹ Sankey, “Factivity or Grounds?” 333.

¹⁰ Of course, the claim that knowledge requires justification is an assumption just as much as the claim that knowledge requires truth is. Both, however, are assumptions that are widely accepted among epistemologists. Even those that reject traditional analyses of knowledge and embrace a so-called “knowledge first” epistemology, agree that knowledge entails truth, belief, and justification. See, for example, Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).