

# Accomplishing Accomplishment

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The themes of this paper are taken further in my 'Accomplishment' (2013) on the PhilPapers site, which discusses the duality between knowledge and accomplishment in general.

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**Abstract** The concepts of knowledge and accomplishment are duals. There are many parallels between them. In this paper I discuss the "AA" thesis, which is dual to the well known KK thesis. The KK thesis claims that if someone knows something, then she knows that she knows it. This is generally thought to be false, and there are powerful reasons for rejecting it. The AA thesis claims that if someone accomplishes something, then she accomplishes that she accomplishes it. I argue that this, too, is false, and that the reasons it is false parallel reasons for the falsity of the KK thesis.

**Keywords** Knowledge · Accomplishment · Externalism · Sosa · Williamson · Second order knowledge · Second order accomplishment

This paper argues from strong premises to an interesting conclusion. It also reflects on a somewhat mysterious fact whose significance is linked to these premises. Many readers' first reaction will be "Fine, as far as it goes. Now let's have an argument for the premises." But that argument will have to be found elsewhere (for example in the second chapter of Morton [forthcoming](#)). Here, I think about some things that would follow from the premises.

## 1 Premises

Knowledge is a causal relation between a person and a fact or proposition. A person knows something when the truth of their belief in that something is non-accidentally true in a particular way. It is hard to spell out explicitly what kinds of accidents do and do not disqualify a true belief from being known. A lucky guess does not make knowledge, though a random turn of the head so that your gaze falls on the rare bird on the branch may be a central part of a knowledge-acquiring process (Pritchard

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2005). Reasoning may be part of a causal process leading to knowledge, but it may play a negligible role, as in perceptual knowledge or reliance on reliable testimony. Occasionally, a true belief is known although its negation is supported, unsuccessfully, by reasoning. An example would be the conviction that your mother is your mother, when she appears to fix the phones in the psychology laboratory in which you have been given a placebo that you are convincingly told will make all people look like your mother; or, more simply, Hume's conviction that Adam Smith was the same person he had known for years.

Externalist epistemologists add argument, nuance, and detail to this picture (for two very different versions, see Goldman 1986 and Sosa 2007). They may or may not add a definition or other characterisation of 'knows' as part of the argument, or instead they may take it to be a basic part of our conceptual apparatus, not definable in more accessible terms (Williamson 2000, see also Williamson 2010). (This 'knowledge first' line tends to push reasoning to the side, because if it were central one would expect to be able to say exactly in what way it was central.)

We externalists often take a "definition" of knowledge as a rough approximation, to see what sort of properties one might expect knowledge to have. It is rather like using  $22/7$  for  $\pi$  or modeling fluid motion by ignoring turbulence. Something a little less crude than "to know is to have a belief that is in the right way non-accidentally true" is needed for these purposes. Personally, I often use a Nozick-style counterfactual account. I am well aware that "s knows p iff were it the case that not p, s would not believe that p" is false. But it is helpful to use it as a thinking tool, as long as one exercises a due caution about it.

(There is a subtler version of this last point, urged on me by James Cargile. We can take one of these definitions, call it schmoledge, work out its properties, and then see which of them seem acceptable for knowledge. It is like saying "let's ignore turbulence in modeling this process, and watch out for any trouble that results.")

Those are the externalist premises—now for the symmetry premises. The symmetry in question is between belief and action. When you know you have a belief with some content p, it is non-accidentally true, and to a first approximation it is linked by a negative counterfactual to the fact that makes it true. When you act *successfully* you have an intention, or a desired result, and it comes to be true. The intention does not guarantee the success but is an important part of what made it happen. You may be surprised when your efforts result in something you were aiming at but not expecting to achieve, as when a music student to her own amazement manages a beautiful performance of a difficult piece.

You can get what you want by accident, and in that way be successful; but that is not the kind of success I have in mind. I have in mind getting what you want because of your efforts. Accident can play a certain role in this, as when a dollar coin happens to fall out of someone's pocket and you succeed in catching it before it rolls down a drain: were it not for the chance that it fell when it did you would not have been in a position to make your desire to be a dollar richer come true. Someone might argue that this small degree of chance is enough to justify saying that you did not succeed in gaining a dollar, but just luckily got that much richer. That would be like a form of epistemic skepticism which holds that the element of chance in nearly all our acquisition of true beliefs and our limited ability to control for alternative possibilities mean that very few of our true beliefs ought to be counted as knowledge. While I

think this position is wrong, it is the symmetry that is of interest: reasons for doubting that we know much transform into reasons for doubting that we achieve much by our efforts.

The assumption is thus that there is a relation between a person  $s$  and a fact  $p$ — $s$  brings it about that  $p$  is true by use of her practical capacities—which is, as a mathematician might say, dual to the relation of knowing:  $s$  acquires the true belief that  $p$  by use of her epistemic capacities. The relation is essentially the same, with the world-to-mind causal direction replaced with a mind-to-world direction. It is no accident that  $s$  has a true belief; it is no accident that  $s$  has a realised intention. (We could easily speak of true intentions and desires— $s$  has a true belief that  $p$  when  $s$  believes that  $p$  and  $p$ ;  $s$  has a true desire that  $p$  when  $s$  desires that  $p$  and  $p$ —but for some reason we speak this way in no language for which I have any intuitions. In our normal speech we also distinguish between intentions and desires, a real distinction I shall neglect. For present purposes an intention is just a desire to perform a particular action at a particular time.) In the nearest worlds in which  $p$  does not hold,  $s$  does not believe that  $p$ ; in the nearest worlds in which  $s$  does not intend that  $p$ ,  $p$  does not hold. It is very plausible that there is a *rough* parallel here, but the assumption is that there is a deep and pervasive symmetry, systematic enough that considerations about it could overrule intuitions about knowledge alone.

Some parallel cases bring out the connections between the two. Suppose that someone recognizes a friend in the fading light, a hundred metres away, riding a bicycle. That is, she feels sure that it is that friend, and it is, but she has little idea how she is doing this. Her belief will be knowledge if it results from capacities to adjust to dim varying illumination, to the failure of colour vision in the gloom, and from a flexible representation of her friend's face and typical posture, which are a counterfactually reliable source of information about the topic of who-the-hell-is-it, or so a philosopher making the kind of assumption I am making would say. She could be in a subjectively similar situation, she can only just make out the figure of the cyclist but she is sure it is friendly Frank, and have a true belief but not have knowledge, because it was just a matter of chance that the person pedalling by was the person her unconscious chain of ideas was making her expect. Now suppose that someone accomplishes a rare physical feat. Suppose that he is playing golf in the fading light and he sinks a putt from ten feet away on a badly cut lawn and slightly uphill. That is the kind of thing that experienced golfers can do as a result of their skill and experience, but can also sometimes do just because the gods are smiling. There is a difference between the two cases; in the one case the sunk putt results from capacities to judge distances accurately in the fading light and to adapt the swing to an estimate of the distance and the texture of the lawn, which are a counterfactually reliable way of getting balls into holes, and in the other nothing of this sort is at work. And again the two may be subjectively indistinguishable.

I shall refer to action that makes a desire actual as accomplishment. Many uses of "to do" and of many particular verbs of accomplishment presuppose that accomplishment requires conditions that are dual to those that mark knowledge. (You plan an assassination and then, when trying to get near enough to use your weapon, you sneeze, leading to your victim's catching the flu and dying. You haven't assassinated him, though you played a causal role in his death.) In a recent book (Sosa 2011) Ernest Sosa has argued, in effect, that the features that distinguish knowledge apply to

action as well. Sosa, as in previous work, classifies beliefs as "accurate" if they are true, "adroit" if they are epistemically virtuous, and "apt" if they are accurate because they are adroit. Apt beliefs are "animal knowledge". In his new book he extends their classification to action. And although Sosa does not use the term, we could call apt actions animal accomplishments: getting what you want because of your efforts and capacities. I have also argued for a thoroughgoing symmetry, in a book (Morton [forthcoming](#)) that I expect to appear before long. There are many serious objections to the assumption that there is a single coherent relation of accomplishment, let alone that it is dual to the relation of knowledge. But for the purposes of this short paper, the assumption is assumed, and we are concerned with what might follow from it.

## 2 Accomplishing Accomplishment

It is generally harder to know that you know than it is to know, as we generally now accept. People often know but do not know that they know, and often think, often truly, that they know without knowing. The case is similar when it is someone else's knowledge that is at issue: often a person knows something but a well-informed observer with access to the same evidence does not know that she knows it. (One consequence is that though a central function of the concept of knowledge is for assessing the credentials of people giving testimony, that assessment is often very challenging.) And knowing whether one will know something in an anticipated future situation is often extremely challenging (see Williamson 2000, especially all of chapter 5, and section 8.7, and Kelp and Pederson 2010). I will take all of these to be true, though they are certainly not all beyond controversy. The question for now is, Are there corresponding differences between accomplishment and accomplishing accomplishment?

First we have to make it clear what it is to accomplish accomplishment. You meet a challenge by walking along a straight line after a few drinks. This might have been due to your balance and control, or it might have been that you happened to wobble the right direction at the right moment, the tremors in your legs happening to compensate for the swirling in your sense of right-left-up-down. You are unlikely to know which it was—so knowing that you accomplished something is not entailed by accomplishing it—but suppose that it was due to these factors and it counts as your accomplishment. You may be surprised if someone with a better grasp of the situation than yours tells you that it was an accomplishment—you did it—and not a fluke. (You may say, with surprise, "I did it," but you do not mean "I accomplished the straight walk," but "I walked straight." It is like saying with surprise "I got it right," when you guess the right answer to a hard question.) You were not in enough control of things to make sure that it was an accomplishment. If you had wanted to make it an accomplishment you could have done some obvious things. You could have practiced first, or you could have drunk less to start with. By doing so, you would have made it the case that you walked the line as a result of your efforts. Then your accomplishment would have been that your subsequent act was itself an accomplishment.

The distinction is easily stated and perhaps more easily seen when the subjects of the two accomplishments are different. Arthur wants Beth to manage to walk a straight line at the end of a party, and not just by luck. So he persuades her first to

drink less and then to practice. In this way his accomplishment is that she accomplishes the straight line walk.

We can have one without the other. Beth can accomplish her walk without Arthur making it possible for her to do it, and without anyone else, including herself, making it possible for her. If at the end of the party someone challenges her to walk the straight line and then she does, moreover, by exercise of the balance and control that she manages to summon, then she has accomplished the walk, without accomplishing the accomplishment.

So, as I shall say, A does not entail AA any more than K entails KK. (I shall use A to abbreviate accomplishment, in parallel to the now standard use of K to abbreviate knowledge, so that the failure of the principle that if a person knows something is abbreviated as the fact that K does not entail KK, just as Gettier cases show the failure of the idea that  $K = JTB$ , where JTB signifies justified true belief.) There are trivial reasons for both of these, as well as these interesting revealing cases. To know that one knows something, one has to believe that one knows it. But the average two year old child or intelligent dog knows many things without having any beliefs of the form "I know that p". Similarly, to accomplish something one has to want or intend it—in the general sense that it is what one is aiming at—and small children and dogs do not want that they accomplish anything and so do not accomplish accomplishing it. A sophisticated KK or AA principle could claim that an intelligent enough and sufficiently reflective agent who knew or accomplished something would be in a position to know or accomplish that they knew or accomplished it. Though it would not be worth putting a lot of effort into formulating such a principle, part of the interest of counterexamples such as the one above is in forestalling such triviality-proof principles.

There are many other kinds of cases in which A or K is present without AA or KK, respectively, based on other aspects of accomplishment or knowledge. (Indirectly, they strengthen the case for the underlying duality.) I will mention just two. First there are considerations of alternatives. Sometimes, to know something one has to have ruled out alternatives to one's conclusion; this is typically true when abduction is involved. And sometimes, to accomplish something one has to have controlled for particular disturbing factors. You are trying to ride a unicycle across a plank on a windy day. A slight gust of wind would interfere with the side-to-side swivelling that is essential to unicycling and make you leave the plank or lose your balance, so you have to be ready to compensate for gusts. How ready with how drastic compensation depends on how gusty a day it is. You have anticipated gusts and you get across. Was it because you anticipated the actual gustiness of the day or were you just lucky to have unicycled during a lull in a gustier than expected day? You are unlikely to know. But if you had erected a barrier between yourself and the wind, or employed a meteorologist to give a precise gust intensity forecast, you would have controlled this variable. As a result, you may have accomplished your feat of unicycling across the board in the wind without accomplishing your accomplishment.

The second kind of case turns on the indefiniteness of the limits of knowledge or accomplishment. When we are speaking of knowledge we often require a suitable strength of evidence and a matching degree of confidence. Too little and the belief, though true and reasonable, may not be knowledge. A person's belief may be on the knowledge side of the threshold without her knowing that it is, perhaps because she

does not know where in this case the threshold lies. Analogously, accomplishment requires that one's efforts produce the effect with a certain likelihood: tossing a fair coin that then lands heads is not accomplishing heads, but undertaking something which then succeeds in spite of the one in a million chance that it would not, is.

Suppose one tosses a thousand sided die having placed a bet that will succeed unless side number 999 falls upwards. One wins, but feels unsure whether one has rescued oneself from bankruptcy or just lucked out. One could have thought about the case or consulted an expert (me?) and then have chosen only a bet such that if it succeeded one would have accomplished one's win. (I would have said that the relevant margin is the point at which it is reasonable to place the bet. But it does not matter for the present issue whether this is right.) But if one did not, and the probabilities were right, and the gamble paid off, then one has accomplished one's aim (winning \$10,000 or saving oneself from bankruptcy) without accomplishing the accomplishment.

This has been an argument by examples. Different examples will be persuasive for different people. To give a more theory-based argument we would need a theoretical account of accomplishment, like the many theories of knowledge. It would be contestable, as they all are. But the conclusion would follow if we begin with most accounts of knowledge—defensible externalistic ones, on which K does not entail KK—replace belief with desire, and reverse the direction of causal influence in obvious ways. Then accomplishing accomplishment will differ from accomplishment, just as knowledge of knowledge differs from knowledge.

For example, on a counterfactual account we would find that

- (a) in the nearest worlds in which p is not desired p is false is compatible with
- (b) in the nearest worlds in which (a) is not desired (a) is true.

In fact, all of the examples I have used could be tinkered with so as to fit this pattern.

### 3 Digression: Accomplishment and Intentional Action

Often when a person accomplishes something they do so by an intentional action. And often when someone's intention is satisfied but they have not accomplished the result, the action is not intentional, as when a person who wants to kill ants accidentally steps on one.

But they are different concepts: it is acts that are or are not intentional, and outcomes that are or are not accomplishments. Many outcomes that one accomplishes cannot be described as actions. Iago wants Othello to distrust Desdemona, so he does various things that have this result. Othello's distrust is Iago's accomplishment, but it is not anyone's action. Some of the things that Iago does to bring this about are intentional, but some may not be. He may perform crucial actions involuntarily, and then deliberately act in ways that exploit them. Moreover, one can accomplish something simply by performing an unintentional action, as when one presses a button by deliberately banging one's knee to evoke the patellar reflex. (Or, James Cargile's example, when one discourages a bore by yawning.) It might be thought that though there is an involuntary action here, the deliberate production, non-suppression

or exploitation of it makes the bringing about of the aimed-at outcome an intentional act. My own intuitions on such cases are very unclear, but consider this case. You want to do something that you think you shouldn't, transmit some damaging information about a friend or acquire a certain belief, and so you set up a situation in which the environment will lead to your involuntarily letting it happen: you say something presupposing the embargoed fact or you find the force of conformity overwhelming you into agreement. Here the particular action seems to me clearly unintentional, but its result is an accomplishment. The case of belief is particularly telling, since the acquisition of a belief is almost always not intentional, but one can certainly accomplish the result that one believes something. Cases like these may be part of the (or my) sense of unclarity around what is properly called intentional and what is not. I would encourage sticking to a distinction here, and saying of these and various other cases that one accomplishes something via an unintentional action.

#### 4 AT and K

These parallels between knowledge and accomplishment are so striking that they prompt a suggestion: why not simply take knowledge to be a kind of accomplishment? Knowledge would be the accomplishment of the aim of getting a true belief:  $K = AT$ . After all, when you know it is not just by accident that you have a true belief, then it is not just by accident that your project of getting a true belief on the topic of interest has succeeded.

For all the appeal of the idea, it has problems. To begin, one can have knowledge without wanting to have a true belief. One might wish to know as little as possible about, say, one's neighbour's love affairs, but then perception and evidence force knowledge on one. Or one might want a false belief and end up with knowledge. This may seem weird, but consider an atheist who is convinced by Pascal's wager to go to mass and read works of devotion, trying to get what he takes to be a false belief in God's existence. If God exists, the former atheist may, as a result of this process, know it. Moreover, we cannot say that knowledge is the result of successful enquiry, both because some enquiry—or at any rate cognition—aims at falsity, or at something less than truth, and because much knowledge does not result from any inquiry at all.

And consider the inverse identification. If  $K = AT$  one might expect that  $A = KS$ , where S is success: to accomplish is to know that one has succeeded. But this is obviously wrong. One can accomplish something without having any idea that one is succeeding, as when a revolutionary struggles to subvert the power of a despot and takes herself to be failing, although, as may only be apparent years later, her actions achieved their end.

As all these suggest, the difference between knowledge and accomplishment consists in not simply the belief/desire contrast but also in the difference in direction of fit or direction of influence. We can in fact imagine two 'backwards' relations, in which a fact is sensitive to a belief as fact is to desire in accomplishment—call this inverse accomplishment, and in which a desire is sensitive to a fact as belief is to fact in knowledge—call this inverse knowledge. Inverse accomplishment could be had by a god-like creature who by believing that things were some way could bring them to be so. (One can imagine some spoiled infant whose courtiers make her expectations

be realised, with law-like efficiency.) Inverse knowledge could be had by a Hegelian agent who embraced occurrences as manifestations of destiny, however fervently she had earlier wished for them not to occur, again with a lawlike force. (There could be exceptions, just as we often fail to know or accomplish; but when inverse knowledge or accomplishment occurred it would have to have the right kind of freedom from accident.) These are clearly not our usual concepts, though if the substitution of desire for belief were all that was required to turn knowledge into accomplishment they would be minor variations on them.

There are ample reasons, then, to deny that knowledge is the accomplishment of true belief. Can we say anything along these lines, to capture the sense that knowledge, often, at any rate, is the successful completion of inquiry? Perhaps there is nothing general to be said in the terms of this paper. But I shall end with a conjectural connection:

*If you accomplish true belief, then you have accomplished knowledge.  $AT \supset AK$ .*

A person can certainly have true beliefs that are not known, just as a person can get what she wants without, or in spite of, trying. But if she directs herself at truth and her efforts succeed, then what she ends up with is knowledge.

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