CLOSURE FAILURES FOR SAFETY

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Ernest Sosa and others have proposed a safety condition on knowledge: If S knows p, then in the nearest (non-actual) worlds in which S believes p, p is true. Colloquially, this is the idea that knowing requires not being easily mistaken. Here, I will argue that like another condition requiring a counterfactual relation between a subject’s belief and the world, viz. Robert Nozick’s sensitivity condition, safety leads, in certain cases, to the unacceptable result that knowledge is not closed under known implication.

Let’s begin with Nozick’s condition. It says that if S knows that p, then in the nearest (non-actual) worlds in which p is false, S does not believe p. Nozick himself was aware that this condition is not closed under known entailment. Roughly, a condition, c, is closed under known entailment just in case the following is true: if S meets c with respect to p and S knows that p entails q, then S meets c with respect to q. To illustrate the fact that sensitivity is not closed, Nozick used a familiar case. Take someone who, on the basis of looking, believes that he has hands. This belief is sensitive, since in the nearest worlds in which he is handless, our subject was the victim of an unfortunate accident, an accident whose effects he would be all too aware of. Our subject knows, and can employ, the straightforward entailment that if he has hands then he is not a handless brain-in-a-vat who is being fed experiences which suggest that he has hands. However, his belief that he is not this sort of brain-in-a-vat is not sensitive, since if he were such a brain-in-a-vat, he would nonetheless believe that he wasn’t.

Nozick went on to claim that since sensitivity is not closed, neither is knowledge. I will call the principle that says knowledge is closed under
known entailment, K-Closure. K-Closure says that if S knows that p and S knows that q entails q, then S knows that q. Nozick went on to construe the consequence that K-Closure is false as a virtue of his account.4

Whether it is independently plausible to think that K-Closure fails in the hands-BIV case is controversial. However, in certain other cases where sensitivity fails to be closed, the implication that the relevant instance of K-Closure fails is unpalatable — and this time, uncontroversially so. A number of such cases appeared in the literature on Nozick. One came from Saul Kripke.7 On the basis of looking and seeing that there is a red barn in the field, Harriet correctly believes that

(RB) there is a red barn in the field.

Prone to being a bit pedantic, she goes on to note that

(*) if there is a red barn in the field, then there is a barn in the field.

Logically competent, she then deduces, from (RB) and (*) that

(B) there is a barn in the field.

In this case, it is highly plausible to think that Harriet knows both (RB) and (B). After all, she sees that there is a red barn in the field (where 'sees' is a success term) and forms the belief that (RB) on this basis. Moreover, Harriet recognizes that the move from (RB) to (B) is as plain as day.

There is some room to disagree. A skeptic might think that a true belief based on a seeing episode with matching content is not sufficient for knowledge; and whatever else is needed is not present in this case. Still, the skeptic will agree with the following conditional claim: if Harriet knows (RB), then she also knows (B). This claim is very plausible. To deny it is to claim that Harriet might know (RB), but fail to know (B). The mind boggles at this possibility. Even if you were somehow persuaded by the skeptic that Harriet does not know (B), it seems that this should compel you to retract the claim that Harriet knows (RB). After all, how could Harriet know that there is a red barn in the field, without knowing that there is a barn in the field?

Well, this is exactly what proponents of sensitivity have to say. To see this, suppose that in the nearest world in which there is not a red barn in the field, the locals put a blue barn there instead. Were Harriet in that situation, she would not believe there is a red barn before her. This makes her belief that (RB) sensitive. Suppose, in addition, that in the nearest non-actual worlds in which there is no barn in the field, there
is a barn façade there. In such a situation, Harriet would be tricked by
the façade and mistakenly believe that there is a barn in the field. For
this reason, her belief that (B) is insensitive. Put together, these results
imply that if sensitivity is a condition on knowledge, Harriet can know
(RB), while failing to know (B). We have seen that the latter is absurd;
so sensitivity must not be a condition on knowledge.

To show that safety fares no better, we just need to design a case
where the background is filled-in so that closure fails for safety. This we
can do. Suppose first that the key facts about Harriet are just the same:
she looks out her car window, she sees that there is a red barn in the
field, and on this basis she believes that there is a red barn in the field.
Again, she notes that if this is so, then there is a barn in the field. And
upon these two beliefs, she once again infers that there is a barn in the
field. For just the same reasons as before, if she knows (RB), then she
knows (B).

This time suppose the county planners very rarely put up red barns.
In fact, when deciding whether to erect something on a given site, and
deciding what to erect, they consult a random device that has a one in
a million chance of telling them to erect a red barn. What the device is
far more likely to tell them to do is to erect a barn façade. Because of all
this, over 99% of the local structures that appear to be barns are really
barn façades. However, none of the façades are red. Red holds a special
place in their practices: it is never to be the color of a façade.

With these circumstances in mind, consider again Harriet’s belief
that (RB). This belief is safe if in the nearest non-actual world in which
Harriet holds it, it is true. This is so, since red façades are not allowed
and, therefore, anything that looks like a red barn is a red barn. Hence,
her belief that (RB) is safe. In colloquial terms, Harriet’s belief that there
is a red barn in the field could not easily have been mistaken. The same
holds for her belief in the relevant conditional, viz. (*) if there is a red
barn in the field then there is a barn in the field. However, Harriet’s belief
that (B) is not safe. Because of the locals’ proclivity for putting up barn
façades, Harriet’s belief that there is a barn in the field could easily have
been mistaken. Among the nearest non-actual worlds in which she has
this belief, many are worlds where there is a barn façade in front of her,
making her belief false. Together, these results imply that if safety is a
condition on knowledge, Harriet can know (RB), while failing to know (B). Since the latter is absurd, safety is not a condition on knowledge.

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NOTES


2 I say ‘roughly’ because other claims must be amended to the antecedent in order to ensure that S’s belief that q is based on S’s belief that p and S’s knowledge that p entails q. Similar considerations apply for the principle, K-Closure, introduced in the next paragraph. None of the theses amendments cause problems for my argument.

3 See his Philosophical Explanations (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 206ff. In “Strategies for refuting closure,” Analysis 64 (2004): 333-335, Anthony Brueckner defends the claim that if a condition on knowledge is not closed, then knowledge itself is not closed (i.e. K-Closure is false).

4 Nozick, ibid., pp. 204-211, pp. 227-230.

5 This report can be found in, among other places, David Shatz, “Nozick’s Conception of Skepticism,” in The Possibility of Knowledge: Nozick and His Critics, ed. S. Luper-Foy (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), pp. 265, endnote 18. For other cases where absurd denials of closure are alleged to follow from adopting sensitivity, see Williamson, ibid., chapter 7.

6 Beliefs in necessary truths are safe, since they are true in all possible worlds.