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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.[1] 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.[2] 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.[3] 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 p 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.[5] 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.[6] 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

1 See, for example, Ernest Sosa, "Tracking, Competence, and Knowledge," in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, ed. P. Moser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 264-286. Safety is also endorsed in Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially chapter 5; and in Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Luck* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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 these 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.