

Discussion Note



On Knowing and Seeing: Groundwork for a New Empiricism

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Abstract

This is a discussion note on Michael Ayers' *Knowing and Seeing. Groundwork for a New Empiricism*.

Keywords

primary knowledge – secondary knowledge – perception – scepticism



Denk nicht, sondern schau!

'Don't think, look!'

WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, §66



Michael Ayers. *Knowing and Seeing: Groundwork for a New Empiricism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, ix, 211 pp.; paperback ISBN: 9780198833567, \$70.00.

In *Knowing and Seeing*, Michael Ayers provides the *groundwork for a new empiricism* (as stated in the book's subtitle). It is a critical contribution to epistemology. Let me present some of the book's key statements upfront: (i) We perceive things in the world as they are, as part of our own environment. (ii) We are objects among other objects in the world; our relation to them may provide us with knowledge about them. (iii) (Primary) knowledge comes with knowledge of how and that we know. (This thesis, known as the 'KK principle', is at the core of Ayers' conception of knowledge.) (iv) We can trust our senses. (v) Consequently, scepticism fails to provide a meaningful contribution to a better understanding of knowledge.

Knowing and Seeing is divided into two parts: the longer Part I on *Knowledge, Belief, and Perception* starts from the traditional view on knowledge and the distinction between knowledge and belief. Chapter 1 on 'Knowledge and Belief from Plato to Locke', co-authored with Maria Rosa Antognazza, offers a condensed, but clear outline of traditional epistemology with further thoughts on what we can learn from it. From there, Part I takes a turn to analytic phenomenology of perception and presents us with a notion of a basic ('primary') knowledge, which stems from the direct apprehension of reality. Starting from this fundamental thought, Ayers goes on to discuss conceptualism, in confrontation with McDowell, and 'ordinary language', examining examples of how we normally speak and think about knowledge, belief, understanding and the like. Part II deals with scepticism and externalism. It is a revelatory and important part. Ayers prepares us for Part II in Part I, and he would not want us to skip it, as some might be tempted to do.

1 To the Core: Primary Knowledge

Before addressing the core of Ayers' view, I want to raise an introductory question about the conceptual pair in the title, 'knowing' and 'seeing'. Is there a hierarchy or causal chain between them? If we build upon our perceptual faculties in generating knowledge, wouldn't it rather be the other way around: seeing and (then) knowing; in other words, *because we see it, we know it*? There are a number of publications in the field of sense perception and epistemology with titles in the latter order, as for example 'Seeing and Knowing' (Dretske, 1969), or 'Seeing, Knowing, Understanding' (Stroud, 2018). I am quite certain Ayers chose his title with intent. Let us formulate the matter as a question and

put it this way, then: When we are asked, by an external person or an internal interlocutor, 'How do you know that?', then, Ayers suggests, 'I *saw* it happen' is a very powerful answer, as it is fully sufficient and comes with its own credentials. If I read Ayers right, *seeing* is representative of all perceptual or sensual faculties; at the same time, it certainly serves as a beautiful natural metaphor for understanding an obvious truth (by the light of nature). Ayers thus deliberately places himself within, and in that sense also defends, the long tradition of this metaphorical use of 'seeing', famously applied by Aquinas and paradoxically popular with rationalists.

What I also want to note at the start is the fact that Ayers does not attempt to give a comprehensive definition of knowledge – quite the contrary, he deliberately spares us a continuation of Gettierology, as in his view all we seem to get from it is the consensus that knowledge is *not* justified, true belief.

Ayers does not intend to revive the mutually exclusive understanding of the terms 'knowing' and 'believing', where both rationalists and empiricists share a strict notion of knowledge, which asks for immediacy and evidence and only differ about the tools or faculties to acquire it, viz. the intellect or sense perception; whereas belief, even if justified and reasonable, was taken to be based on 'extraneous' reasons. Ayers recognises the significance of this traditional distinction but criticises the demand of infallibility it makes on the respective tools. To him, the idea(1) of an infallibly truth-delivering faculty is only misleading; and so is the inverted conclusion, drawn from the fallibility of our faculties to the negation of their potential to yield objective certainty.

Ayers still defends the conception of knowledge in the strict sense against the tendency of recent epistemology to aim for a definition that covers each and every case of knowledge. In order to understand what knowledge is, we ought to concentrate on its essential core – this is where Ayers introduces a distinction between 'primary knowledge' and 'secondary knowledge'. Primary knowledge stems from the direct apprehension of reality or truth, just like 'knowledge' in the traditional sense. A crucial aspect of the concept of primary knowledge is its fulfilment of the 'KK condition', or 'KK principle'. This principle requires *knowledge that and of how one knows*. When we have conscious perceptual knowledge (primary knowledge) of surrounding objects / of our environment / of the world in which we exist, then we are aware of that cognitive contact and therefore also in a position to know that and how we know. Furthermore, we can deliberately change our perspective, our position vis-à-vis the objects, to see or understand better. This also means that we all have to do our own knowing. Primary knowledge needs no further act of reasoning; it is *direct* – Ayers shares the anti-sceptical empiricist view that the deliverances of the senses are intrinsically authoritative. He still admits that this authority is

defeasible in certain senses, which he addresses in Part II, Sections 5.5 and 6.4. Without primary knowledge of what is *evident*, there is *no* knowledge, and only on the basis of primary knowledge does secondary knowledge, transferred or extended by inference or causal reasoning, become possible.

2 Secondary Knowledge and Dinosaurs

Secondary knowledge falls outside of the notion of perceptual knowledge, but still counts as knowledge for Ayers. It is not mere belief or opinion. We may think of it as inferential knowledge that is derived from evidence. Ayers employs the two meanings of the term ‘evidence’ to precisify his reasoning – something that is evident at a certain time and place may serve as ‘evidence’, as grounds for a valid conclusion. Thus, secondary knowledge is possible in the sense that when we are not in direct contact with the respective object, we can still have or establish a perspicuous cognitive link between the object and our knowledge of it. Ayers stresses the subject’s active, conscious involvement in the causal route of inference between the object and their own knowing. He points to our knowledge of dinosaurs to illustrate this thought: We *know* that dinosaurs existed because the fossils we perceive here and now demand an explanation that charts back to the animals that died and rotted on the ground we stand upon. This only works if the explanation is the right explanation and the only epistemically possible explanation at the given moment. Ayers’ account raises the question whether the individual subject is actually always able to explain their inferential knowledge that way. And furthermore, to what extent they are allowed to refer to ‘collective knowledge’, when it comes to secondary knowledge, if everybody has to do (or explain) their own knowing. I, for example, am not able to reconstruct a step-by-step conclusion between the bone I look at in a museum and the existence of dinosaurs. I lack biological knowledge, among other things. I guess this must mean that, even though it is a commonly accepted belief, I am not in the position to know that dinosaurs existed? (And I honestly do not believe that *I know* that dinosaurs existed.) It certainly seems insufficient to trace a memory of having once read a convincing explanation in a journal or once seen a documentary online. There may be many additional sources of evidence around to support my potential knowledge, that I, however, am not aware of, but other people are aware of. Do these others then establish that perspicuous link for me that I evidently lack? It is not entirely clear where Ayers draws the line for secondary knowledge, as in fact, he is so generous as to also allow peripheral cases of ‘unconscious’ knowledge for his conception. These cases include examples in which the possessors

of the knowledge are not aware of how they acquired it, or even that they have it. Ayers remarks that such cases are not unusual and credits them with the possibility for (secondary) knowledge inasmuch as there is 'a causal connection with the reality that is the object of belief, a connection that is at least broadly of a type that in other cases is associated with perspicuous or conscious knowledge' (2019, 67). Ayers' example is the 'diffident student' who is able to 'guess' the right answers to forced-choice questions, even if they do not remember ever having learned them.

What I miss in Chapter 2 is a clear account regarding the role of cognition in the use of the terms 'cognitive contact' (constituting primary knowledge) or 'cognitive link' (constituting secondary knowledge). The first case apparently entails no additional act of thought or reasoning, e.g., to unify the manifold of perceptual experiences. Cognition, here, is somehow automatically and immediately embedded in the direct perceptual confrontation. However, in the case of secondary knowledge, there is no other way than to understand 'cognitive link' as the combination of individual inferential or evidential steps via a thought process, which eventually leads to a conclusion and thereby to knowledge. The reader is left to make up her own mind about the diverging meanings of 'cognitive'. I do not think that this is an intentional choice; rather, it seems that Ayers does not regard it as a problem. For the attempt to describe knowledge, however, a clear definition of the function of cognition (and recognition) seems indispensable, and it remains a gap throughout the book.

3 Language, Concepts and Cats

There is a crucial difference between just perceiving something as it is, even if in a focused and concentrated way, and using our senses' deliverances to work with the knowledge arising from it, i.e., between touching the object, smelling it, tasting it, looking at it from different angles, listening to the sounds it makes – and *recognising* the object as such-and-such, e.g., a lilac-painted rhombus of oakwood, a northern cardinal bird. The first way of engaging with surrounding objects is open to pre-conceptual children and animals. Animals might even gain much more, or rather, more detailed information here, because some of their senses are more sophisticated or just different than ours. Just think of the bat's ears, the octopus's arms. The second way builds on conceptual education, with the aim to structure the world.

For Ayers 'integration of the senses' means that the senses are integrated around objects. We experience objects in the way they impinge on the entirety of our senses. Our sense-fields – visual, tactual, olfactory, auditory, gustatory,

and proprioceptive – are ‘simply different but integrated ways of perceiving the same total object, our environment and, importantly, ourselves in it’ (2019, 86). Ayers dismisses the conceptualist idea, which assumes that our experiences are structured by a system of categories, exclusively available to beings endowed with language. He discusses McDowell’s new position in conceptualism which argues for the following idea: If one is in the possession of language, then one already perceives one’s environment and the things in that environment in a categorically structured way. In one’s perception, moreover, one can ‘focus’ on a specific aspect of one’s environment and ‘give it a name’ (cf. McDowell 2009). McDowell contends that it makes no difference to an individual’s perception whether these names are given schematically or generally, as in ‘piece of furniture’, or specifically-technically ‘Venetian secretaire’. This is to emphasise that an individual is not dependent on linguistic knowledge in order to perceive things appropriately; however, a speaker’s perception of things is permeated by their concepts of things, which implies something like the clearer the concepts the clearer the perception of the world. Ayers counters that the world itself as independent reality *is* structured, and perceiving speakers can only build their conceptual apparatus accordingly. ‘Seeing and knowing are prior to saying’ (2019, 94).

Analogously, Ayers takes a critical look at our ordinary use of language in describing our world. What, he asks, is the difference e.g. between *knowing S*, *knowing of S*, *knowing of S’s being P* and *knowing that S is P*? He argues that these are just versions of talking about the same generic situation: the subject’s cognitive and causal relation to reality. Once we accept this, we also understand that there is no profit in a specification of propositional knowing, or propositional seeing. If there is a food tin on the shelf and this state of affairs is directly evident to the cat, then the cat also *knows* that its food is on the shelf. Neither the fact nor the proposition but only the tin on the shelf is relevant for the cat’s knowing.

4 What is Wrong with Scepticism? Dinosaurs Again

Dretske (2003) insists that either externalism or scepticism is true. Both the internalist, who traditionally stands in opposition to the externalist, and the sceptic assume that all direct knowledge derives exclusively from the mind or brain. All further knowledge, even of one’s own body, depends on inference from this internal evidence. This is an account Ayers explicitly rejects as homunculus, for obvious reasons. Nonetheless, he makes it somewhat difficult for us to understand the position his own theory takes in the debate between

externalism and internalism. Like most externalists, he does not consider justification a necessary condition for knowledge. Externalism argues that the possessor of knowledge does not need to be aware of whether the necessary conditions for knowledge are fulfilled. They just have to be fulfilled. At the same time, Ayers builds on the $\kappa\kappa$ principle, which tends to be defended by internalists and rejected by externalists. His arguments against scepticism, however, are presented clearly and strongly. Most of the second part of his book is dedicated to a critical analysis of the Cartesian sceptical argument and the question of whether or not we can trust our senses. While Dretske considers scepticism a serious alternative, Ayers primarily seeks to unmask it. He starts from a characteristically cynical common-sense perspective offering the following example: We do not *know* dinosaurs existed, since there is a possibility that ‘God created the fossil record in the ground exactly as if they did, perhaps in order to test our faith in Scripture’ (2019, 136). This hypothesis demonstrates the vice of the sceptical argument, which lies in the attempt to ‘poison the wells of all knowledge of the world’ (2019, 137). Also, its structure is of a peculiar design, rendering it impossible to be ruled out, but also impossible to be confirmed – this is a point that Ayers stresses several times.

The sceptic builds all his power of argument on the fact that the senses are fallible. Ayers agrees that they are, but does not consider this relevant. Instead, he points out the danger of confusing fallibility with uncertainty. Fallibility applies to capacities or faculties (e.g., senses, reason, etc.), not to beliefs, knowledge, justification, or claims. If a capacity is fallible, its deliverances can be mistaken. Thus, our senses are fallible because they are prone to misperceptions or hallucinations. Certainty, on the other hand, applies to beliefs, knowledge, justification, or claims, and denotes their epistemic standing relative to a body of evidence. If a body of evidence fully supports an assertion, then what is asserted is certain in relation to that body of evidence. It is wrong to conclude that *nothing* is certain just because our faculties are fallible. However, a body of evidence may change. Accordingly, the assertion’s epistemic standing is also potentially subject to change.

If knowledge requires that what is known is certain, then to justify a claim to knowledge that P is to justify the claim that it is, here and now, objectively certain that P. Certainty, as shown above, is related to epistemic possibility and probability. A hypothesis, for Ayers, must be a real epistemic possibility, rather than a merely theoretical one (cf. 2019, 139), that is, its objective probability must be greater than zero. In other words, it is certain that P only if it is not epistemically possible that not-P. It is certain that P if the objective probability that not-P is zero. Ayers argues that the sceptic fails to offer ‘error possibilities’ that are ‘genuine epistemic possibilities in the light of all available evidence,

the usual requirement for “defeating” claims to knowledge that P’ (2019, 196). This is how Ayers tries to shift the burden of proof from the ‘believer’ in, to the ‘doubter’ of our faculties – even though, for him, the latter fails to carry it. So how *do* we come to trust our senses? Ayers ends up offering an explanation from developmental psychology, claiming that it is not through reason or justification, but that ‘we grow into it’ (2019, 183). ‘Coming to full use of its senses and coming to trust them are one and the same process in the child’s development’ (2019, 184). Coming to trust one’s senses is similar to coming to trust one’s legs to walk or run.

This is only a brief insight into Ayers’ publication. Part II in particular has many more revealing aspects to offer. This book will be especially instructive for those readers who are still trying to position themselves in the epistemological debate – regardless of whether or not they accept the arguments developed therein as conclusive. I strongly recommend an in-depth reading, in accordance with Ayers’ hope that it contributes to the refinement of our understanding of knowledge.

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