

Awareness and the Substructure of Knowledge

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Belief Fundamentalism & Representational Pluralism

Chapter 3: Awareness Without Knowledge

Chapter 4: Concepts of Awareness

Chapter 5: Awareness and the Possession of Reasons

Chapter 6: Awareness and the Normativity of Knowledge

Chapter 7: The Natures of Awareness and Knowledge

References

Chapter 1: Introduction

The expression ‘aware of the fact that’ is a commonplace, not at all a philosopher’s term of art. We often *criticize* each other in terms of awareness: ‘You were aware of the fact that it was wrong, but you did it anyway!’ We sometimes seek to *excuse* ourselves from wrongdoing in terms of awareness: ‘I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware of the fact that you would be hurt by my action.’ We *admonish* each other in terms of awareness: ‘You should be aware of the fact that you can easily offend Germans by making casual jokes about their soccer.’ Were we to suspect a person of being ignorant of an important detail we might naturally seek to *inform* them of both their ignorance and the important detail with a question about awareness: ‘Are you aware of the fact that the borders have been closed?’ These are not oblique expressions that call out for artful interpretation. When these expressions are used for the purposes of criticizing, excusing, admonishing, and informing they are meant to be understood straightforwardly in terms of sentence-meaning. Such uses presuppose the existence of a state of *awareness* that one can be in or fail to be in with regard to some *fact*. Here lies the phenomenon of *factual awareness*.

With a limited number of exceptions, epistemologists have given little-to-no attention to questions about the general place and epistemic significance of factual awareness. There is no widely shared, no widely discussed, and no systematically explored answer to the following question:

The Awareness Question. What is it to be aware of a fact, and what is the place of such awareness in epistemology?

Part of the reason this question has been overlooked is owed to the fact that questions about *the awareness of facts* sound a lot like questions about *knowledge of facts*. It is difficult to hear the difference between ‘*S* knows that *p*’ and ‘*S* is aware of the fact that *p*’. Indeed, it seems like the aforementioned acts of criticizing, excusing, admonishing, and informing that rely on expressions involving ‘aware’ could all be re-expressed using ‘knows’. Accordingly, understanding the significance of the Awareness Question depends on getting a grip on the target concept of factual awareness and how it might begin to depart from knowledge.

There are two ways of isolating a relevant concept of awareness on which questions about the awareness of facts do not immediately collapse into questions about knowledge of facts. The first way is anchored in ordinary language and involves

reflection on specific modes of factual awareness that can fall short of knowledge. For example, Bernecker's seminal work on memory (2010) advanced the idea that *remembering that p* is distinct from having memorial knowledge that *p* because remembering that *p* does not require belief that *p*, or ultima facie justification to believe *p*, or the absence of all forms of knowledge-compromising luck. Since remembering that *p* is a way of being aware of the fact that *p* it follows that remembering that *p* is a way of being aware of the fact that *p* which is distinct from knowing that *p*. Similarly, many have argued that *seeing that p* is distinct from paradigmatic instances of visual knowledge because seeing that *p* does not require belief that *p*, or ultima facie justification to believe that *p*, or the absence of all forms of knowledge-compromising luck. Since seeing that *p* is a way of being aware of the fact that *p* it follows that seeing that *p* is a way of being aware of the fact that *p* which is distinct from knowing that *p*.¹ For a final example, a priori insight that *p* and *p*'s being self-evident to an agent are naturally understood as a kind of awareness of facts that fall short of knowledge in that such awareness does not require a belief that *p* or ultima facie justification to believe that *p*.² There is well-known resistance to these claims and they are explored and addressed in Chapter 3. This chapter also produces new cases where *inferential* factual awareness separates from knowledge. For now, notice that *if* these claims are right then one can be aware of a fact without knowing it.

The second way of isolating a concept of factual awareness on which it does not immediately collapse into knowledge uses 'factual awareness' to refer to a relation that is a modest generalization of the knowledge relation. On virtually all accounts of knowledge, part of what it is to know that *p* is to have a non-accidentally true belief that *p*. Beliefs that are *non-accidentally true* are beliefs that are held or formed in such a way that their truth is not a matter of chance in some epistemically relevant sense. A belief's being reliably formed, or being safely formed, or being sensitively formed, or being justified by the facts one possesses each illustrate ways of being non-accidental in this broad sense.

Further, on virtually all accounts, knowledge is a kind of non-accidental true *representation*. This is because knowledge is a kind of belief state and belief states are representational states (Chapter 2). But believing that *p* is not the only way of hosting a mental state that represents *p*. There are more ways for minds to represent the world than by believing propositions about the world, and these ways of representing the world can all stand in the same general type of non-accidentality relations to facts that knowledge stands in to facts. These observations, if correct, imply that knowledge is *but*

¹ McDowell (1994, 2002), Huemer (2001), Turri (2010), and Pritchard (2012b).

² Bealer (1998, 2000, 2004), Pust (2000, 2019), and Audi (2008).

one type of non-accidental true representation. So if we use ‘factual awareness’ to refer to this state of *non-accidental true representation* that we reached via a modest generalization from knowledge it will trivially follow that knowledge is but one kind of factual awareness. Much of the theoretical work in what follows could be rested on this stipulative use of the term ‘factual awareness’. The significance of this cannot be overstated since the existence of a class of states of ‘factual awareness’ that are distinct from knowledge follows from minimal and reasonably uncontroversial assumptions about knowledge, representation, and non-accidentality. Chapter 4 defends this way of isolating a concept of factual awareness.³

These two ways of isolating a relevant concept of factual awareness that is distinct from knowledge needn’t be at odds. Seeing that *p*, remembering that *p*, having an a priori insight that *p* are akin to knowing that *p* in being a kind of representational state that requires the satisfaction of some kind of non-accidentality condition. Provided there is overlap in the non-accidentality relation required for knowledge and these other states, we will have the makings for an argument that knowing that *p*, seeing that *p*, remembering that *p*, etc. are distinct kinds of factual awareness. Chapter 4 defends this claim and unifies these two approaches to isolating a relation of factual awareness that is distinct from knowledge.

The view that knowledge is but one kind of factual awareness generates a range of questions. What kinds of non-accidentality relations are necessary for being factually aware? Is mere reliably produced true representation enough for factual awareness, or is some kind of virtue-theoretic condition required, or are more robust modal or explanatory conditions called for? Are there sufficient conditions for factual awareness that are not themselves necessary conditions? What is the relation between factual awareness and notions like *being in a position to know* and *being capable of knowing*? These questions are taken up in Chapters 4 and 7.

While Chapters 2-4 lay the groundwork for distinguishing knowledge from factual awareness, Chapters 5-7 put factual awareness to work. Chapter 5 takes up the question of possessing objective reasons (facts). In recent years, a significant body of literature has converged on the idea that knowledge is somehow central to understanding what it takes to possess a fact as reason for a response. This chapter explains how and why factual awareness provides a novel and theoretically preferable account of the epistemic condition for possessing objective reasons. The resulting view is that the reasons one possesses are, roughly, the usable facts that one is in a position to be aware of.

³ Previous work on the theoretical value of factual awareness used ‘factual awareness’ to refer to the indicated generalization of knowledge (Silva 2021a, 2021b).

Chapter 6 takes up the question of the normativity of knowledge in relation to the awareness-centric theory of possession developed in Chapter 5. A very wide range of epistemologists have held that knowledge is a constitutively normative state, i.e. a state that is grounded in the possession of reasons. But many epistemologists have found it plausible that certain cases of proprioceptive knowledge, memorial knowledge, self-evident knowledge, and certain other cases of knowledge are not grounded in the possession of reasons. These are the target cases of ‘basic knowledge’. The existence of basic knowledge forms a primary objection to the idea that knowledge is a constitutively normative state. This chapter offers a way through the apparent dilemma of having to choose between basic knowledge and the normativity of knowledge. Central to resolving this dilemma is the thesis of Chapter 5: that the reasons one possesses are, roughly, the usable facts that one is in a position to be aware of.

Chapter 7 offers a theory of factual awareness that provides the foundation for a novel normative theory of knowledge. The basic idea is that factual awareness is to be understood along virtue-theoretic lines while knowledge is to be understood in terms of safe belief for sufficient reason. The result is an ideologically unique normative, anti-luck, virtue epistemology whose motivations are natural and grounded in insights about the nature of factual awareness and widely shared insights about the nature of knowledge. The emergent view of knowledge has much in common with Dretske’s (1971; 2017) view that knowledge is belief for *conclusive reason*, and Schroeder’s (2015a,b) view that knowledge is belief for *sufficient reason*. But the theory of knowledge offered in Chapter 7 differs from both in key respects. Crucially, the fact that factual awareness is sharply distinguished from knowledge affords the emergent theory of knowledge a range of explanatory advantages that make it far more resilient to objections than existing theories of knowledge.

The history of past failures to provide an adequate reductive analysis of knowledge suggests something disheartening about the possibility of any future success (Williamson 2000). However, what I hope to convince you of is that we have, in different ways, been expecting too much from a theory of knowledge. For no theory of a species should be expected to explain every fact about its genus or other distinct species of that genus. But in failing to clearly distinguish knowledge from factual awareness, epistemologists have often done exactly that. The result being that theories of knowledge get pushed around by competing and incompatible pressures. The way forward is to better understand the substructure of knowledge given by its genus, or so I will argue.

Despite my optimism that we can provide a reductive analysis of both knowledge and factual awareness, Chapter 7 concludes with a discussion of what would happen if we took factual awareness to be beyond reductive analysis in the way that some

knowledge-first epistemologists have taken knowledge to be. The upshot is that all the main lessons from Chapters 2-6 would remain in place and, arguably, the proposed reductive theory of knowledge would remain in place as well.

Readers will doubtless realize that the main thesis of this book, if correct, raises a sweeping and intriguing range of new and unexplored questions. Generally, in any case where some interesting epistemic thesis makes *knowing that p* necessary and/or sufficient for a condition C, we can ask whether or not (mere) *awareness of the fact that p* is instead necessary and/or sufficient for C. For example, is it knowledge or factual awareness that is needed to specify the nature of ignorance, the nature and norms of inquiry, the nature of understanding, the epistemic norm(s) of action and assertion, and the correctness conditions of belief? What might awareness have to do with ‘learning’ new information in the sense relevant for rational belief updates? What is the nature of factual awareness for group agents? Are extended mind hypotheses better understood in terms of factual awareness or knowledge, given that epistemically significant extensions of our minds don’t extend our beliefs (Farkas 2015)? Is awareness of moral facts easier to come by than knowledge of moral facts due to the (arguable) historical ‘fragility’ of our moral attitudes (Silva 2020)? Could it be that knowledge, but not awareness generally, is subject to pragmatic encroachment, and thus explains the sustained debate over (im)purism in recent epistemology? These are among the questions to be addressed after the fundamental issues raised in this volume have been scrutinized by the wider epistemological community. My aim with this volume is to carefully and systematically defend a set of opening moves that provide the foundation for a much larger discussion, one that promises to resolve old problems as well as to open up new avenues of research.