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DANTO ON KNOWLEDGE AS A RELATION

By JAMES H. LESHER

DANTO holds that knowledge is not a condition or property of the individual knower, but is a relation between the individual and some object in the world: 'To know that *s* is then to stand in some relation *R* to some object *o*, where *o* is what makes *s* true.'¹ His main argument is as follows:

- (1) If knowledge that *s* were a property of an individual (*m*), then we could determine that *s* is true by a mere examination of *m*.
- (2) In the typical case, the truth conditions of *s* are independent of *m*.
- (3) If (2) then we cannot determine the truth of *s* by a mere examination of *m*.

Therefore

- (4) Knowledge is not a property of *m*.
- (5) Either knowledge is a property of *m* or it is a relation between *m* and the world.

Therefore

- (6) Knowledge is a relation between *m* and the world.

We may fill out Danto's argument by considering the case of my knowledge that Mt. Shasta is in California (*s*). In this "typical" case,² I am not, nor is any feature of mine, one of the set of truth conditions of *s*; the truth of 'Mt. Shasta is in California' does not logically depend on my existence or condition. Consequently, we cannot determine that Mt. Shasta is in California by merely examining me, but 'also there must be observation of the world' (p. 21). Thus knowing that Mt. Shasta is in California is not a property of mine, but is a way in which I relate to some object in the world.

The crucial claim in Danto's argument is made in premise (3) where he holds that since *m* is not one of the truth conditions of *s*, then we cannot determine whether *s* is true by an examination of *m*. This is equivalent to saying that determining the truth of *s* by means of examining or investigating *m* is possible only if *m* is one of the truth conditions of *s*. Since it is observation of the world which is the means for this determination, we can state Danto's basic principle as follows: we can

¹ Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge* (Cambridge U.P., 1968), p. 76. Danto's argument can be found in Chapter 4, 'Knowledge and Belief', pp. 73–121; the main argument at pp. 97–98, and 103–107.

² As opposed to the atypical case where *s* is about *m* or some feature of *m*. We shall assume that this restriction is adopted throughout.

determine whether *s* is true only by an observation of the truth conditions of *s*.

It may indeed seem paradoxical that we could determine whether *s* is true by examining some entity which is not one of its truth conditions. But it would be even more paradoxical if this were not possible. It is not unlikely that in the majority of cases our knowledge that some statement *s* is true is obtained without any observation on our part of the truth conditions of *s*. Consider for example, our knowledge of the truth of some statement (*L*) about the past: (*L*) 'Lincoln was assassinated in Washington'. Most of us know that *L* is true, but no one of us observed those events which made *L* true, which were in fact the truth conditions of *L*. We are justified in concluding that *L* is true on the basis of our acquaintance with historical accounts. Thus we can determine that *L* is true other than by means of observation of the truth conditions of *L*. Danto has apparently mistaken *truth conditions* of a statement with *evidence conditions* for the truth of that statement: in order for a man to know that *s*, he must have adequate evidence that *s*, and certain conditions must have obtained which make *s* true, but his evidence for *s* need not consist in or stem from his observations of the truth conditions of *s*, as the example of historical knowledge shows.

Moreover, it is possible to determine that *s* is true by means of examining someone who knows that *s*. Suppose that I took a sick child to a doctor who, after having examined him thoroughly, reports: 'It's only a local infection and is not serious'. Suppose also that I proceed to ask the doctor how he knows and he replies that the symptoms are unmistakable to a trained physician. The doctor, *m*, knows that *s*, but can we say that I know that *s* on the basis of my examination of *m*? In this ordinary case, only an allegiance to the high standards of Cartesian certitude, or a wholesale scepticism, will prevent us from saying that I have learned that the child has only a local infection after having consulted the doctor. The example is typical: we often learn from experts. Though their saying that *s* is true doesn't make *s* true, it may be a very good reason for believing that *s* is true. In short, we could determine that *s* is true by examining *m* even if we had not observed the truth conditions of *s*.

There are two final considerations that lead Danto to conclude that knowledge must be viewed as a relation, and which must be faced up to if we are to retain our conception of knowledge as a condition or property of an individual:

- (1) If knowledge were a property of an individual, then a man could determine by introspection whether he knew, and this is not possible.¹

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 21, 'if it were [an absolute property of *m*] then in principle *m* could determine whether he knew that *s* merely through observing himself . . . but it is not typically the case that we find out whether we know something merely by observing ourselves.'

- (2) Saying 'm knows that s' is saying something about 'm and the world together'.¹

But (1) is just false. There are many properties which might be possessed by an individual whose presence he himself could not detect. Organic conditions like pneumonia or heart murmurs are ordinarily beyond the layman's investigative ability, and it is often even harder for a man to tell whether he has some psychological characteristic; *e.g.* whether he is humble or vain, obnoxious or witty. In the case of knowledge, we might be able to determine whether a man's evidence for his belief was sufficient justification even if he himself could not so determine, and so it would not follow from the fact that we could determine whether m knew, that m himself could determine that he knew.

Finally, 'm knows that s' does say something about m and the world together, and we ought to be able to retain (2) even if we were to reject the conclusion which Danto draws from it. The conclusion that 'm knows that s' asserts a relation between m and the world would follow only if it were true that if a statement is about x and y then it affirms a relation between x and y. But this is false, for 'John and Jim are male' and 'John and Jim are unrelated' are both about John and Jim, but neither of these statements affirms a relation between John and Jim. Thus 'm knows that s' can be both about m and the world without thereby asserting a relation to hold between m and some object in the world. In short, 'knows that s' may function as a complex predicate without thereby becoming a relational predicate, and it is just this complexity which is captured by the standard analysis of 'S knows that P' when it analyses this claim into a psychological, semantic, and evidential component.

I conclude that Danto's arguments do not succeed in showing that knowledge is a relation between an individual and some object in the world.

¹ *Op. cit.*, preface, xi, 'To say that m knows that s is, to be sure, to say something about m. But it is not wholly about m the way in which 'm is a man' is about m. Rather, it is about m and the world together.'

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