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EPISTEMOLOGY WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE?

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I

Epistemologists have traditionally been concerned with two issues: the justification of particular beliefs or sets of beliefs, and claims to knowledge. I propose to examine the relative import of these questions by comparing the gravity of the threat posed by two sceptics: one who questions the justifiability of our beliefs, and one who doubts our knowledge claims.

The reasoning sceptic, the only kind of sceptic with whom philosophy need (indeed, can) contend, adduces arguments to support his scepticism. To rebut him, one must show his argument to be invalid, or his premises unwarranted. Consider, for instance, an argument for knowledge-scepticism, founded on the following two premises (Unger, 1971): (1) Certainty is never warranted. (2) Knowledge requires warranted certainty.

The sceptic's opponent must fault the premises, since the conclusion that knowledge is impossible trivially follows from them. Although fairly widely held,[1] both premises may be questioned. Arguments against the rationality of certainty are mainly fallibilist (Peirce, 1966), and may, perhaps, be rebutted by showing that the certainty of the kind that is required for knowledge does not engender dogmatism (unwillingness to formulate one's beliefs in response to experience), and is, therefore, compatible with the scientific attitude.

Against the second assumption invoked by the knowledge-sceptic, it may be argued that one needs neither warrant nor certainty to know a proposition. The hesitant examinee (Woozley, 1952) attests to the possibility of knowing a proposition while being unsure about it. In Bayesian terms, a high enough subjective probability may suffice for knowledge.

Justification may not be necessary for knowledge, either. The philosophical concept of knowledge, it will be claimed, is much more stringent than the everyday one. Often 'I know' is simply used to express conviction: 'I don't think **p**, I know it'. The lover

[1] Most Bayesians argue that the assignment of probability 1 to empirical propositions is dogmatic, and, hence, irrational. The necessity of certainty for knowledge is accepted by many epistemologists. Thus, Ayer (1956, p. 35) gives as a necessary (and sufficient) condition for knowing that p that one should be certain of p's truth, and that one's certainty be warranted.

who asks 'Does your husband know you're here?' is only interested in what the husband believes (and in how he will act), and not in whether his belief is justified.

While this is true, it must be admitted that common usage is itself sometimes more stringent. 'Know' may be an ambiguous, context-dependent term, less liberally used in a court of law than in gossip. And even if 'knows' is sometimes used to mean 'truly believes', it is also used in a less tolerant fashion. Which usage, if any, should concern us? Interpreted which way (if any) does the sceptic pose a real challenge?

A similar question arises, of course, with respect to justification, intuitions about which are also unclear. The concept may have a multiplicity of senses in ordinary usage, not all of which are epistemologically pertinent.

To determine the relevance to epistemology of the different senses of 'know' and 'justified', I propose to employ a 'point-orientated' approach to the analysis of the terms, and consider their function(s) (section II). Such an investigation suggests, I will argue, that a regulative concept of justification is epistemologically fundamental (section III). Knowledge, furthermore, functions regulatively only if it coincides with justification from the first-person perspective, a perspective which is, I argue, epistemologically distinguished (section IV).

The possibility is opened of the two diverging once the standard analysis of knowledge is rejected (section V). We need only contend with knowledge-scepticism when it is engendered by scepticism about the possibility of justification. When it isn't, we can embrace it wholeheartedly (section VI).

II

A fruitful approach to the philosophical explication of a concept focuses on the role it plays in our lives. Thus, Craig (1987) discusses knowledge from a third-person perspective, investigating the function of knowledge ascriptions from the point of view of an inquirer seeking reliable informants. The concept of knowledge, he suggests, 'is used to flag approved informants'. To know **p** is, roughly, to satisfy any condition which is well-correlated with telling the truth about **p**, and more accessible epistemically; more easily detectable than **p**'s truth-value itself. Satisfaction of this condition confers a high probability on the informant's being right.

The 'practical explication' (Craig, 1987) of a concept is

attractive for three reasons. First, it enables us, if we wish, to assess analyses provided in the traditional vein – a specification of conditions necessary and sufficient for the application of the concept. For, although the approach is novel in its *aim* (understanding the purpose of a concept), it provides an alternative *method of assessing* truth-conditional analyses. We now ask whether a concept with such and such truth-conditions fulfils the role the analysed concept is deemed to have, rather than whether the truth-conditions match our intuitive judgements.

Thus, conditions cited in analyses of knowledge (truth-tracking, causation by the fact believed, acquisition via a reliable method) virtually always go together with the reliability (from the inquirer's point of view) of a belief, and this explains, Craig argues, the successes of the analyses. Their failures are explained by the defeasibility of probability statements. Any condition which confers a high probability on the informant being right may be overridden. We can always find examples, albeit freakish, which aren't cases of knowledge, even though the proposed condition is satisfied.

Functional considerations serve also to determine whether a counter-example may be rejected as an instance of a 'secondary usage' of a term. Such a rejection cannot always be dismissed as ad hoc: after all, we should not assume that every concept has a unique meaning. But how do we distinguish a genuine multiplicity of meanings so as to rebut an ad hoc defence of an analysis of a univocal term? Arguably, the functions of a term are more easily individuated than its meanings. If this is so, functional considerations may be invoked to assess the significance of (counter-) examples to an analysis.

The second attraction held by a functional analysis of concepts is that it offers a middle-ground, a more neutral arena, for the debate between the ordinary language philosopher, who appeals to common-sense knowledge and justification attributions, and the sceptic, who gives priority to the more general intuitions about the intensions of the concepts. The latter intuitions, he argues, determine a smaller extension than do intuitions about particular cases, intuitions which he treats with suspicion. The 'practical explication' of a concept may give due weight to ordinary intuitions, indeed even explain them, without endorsing them lock, stock and barrel: to fulfil its function, the concept ought not to be ascribed in a particular case, even if our 'ordinary' intuitions endorse such an application. We may also adduce functional considerations to assess the general intuitions invoked by the

sceptic: need the concept of knowledge, given its function, exclude uncertain belief?

The philosophical strategy pursued by Craig may be carried a step further, and therein lies its third advantage. We may bypass altogether the exasperating question as to the 'true' meaning of the analysandum, and focus, instead, on the more important question, as to why (and which) attributions of the concept matter. We need not always worry about a challenge to the applicability of a concept, and must only rebut the sceptic who questions the legitimacy of attributions we wish to uphold. Knowledge attributions may yet turn out to be easily given up.

III

If reliabilist accounts of knowledge can be motivated by considering the point (rather than the use) of the term, we might, analogously, analyse justification by reference to the role(s) of the concept. As with knowledge, we needn't decide the 'true' (unique) meaning of the term 'justified', and reject analyses which do not fit its intuitive extension. Rather, we should take as a starting point the epistemologically pertinent role we think the concept has, rejecting a proposed analysis because it is irrelevant, even if semantically adequate (answering to an existing concept).

An important use of the concept of justification is regulative, related to belief modification and retention. The regulative concept of justification is used, I suggest, to mark just those beliefs which we ought to hold onto (or adopt) if we are to be rational. It motivates rational belief formation when used by a person to characterise his own beliefs, and underlies judgements of (ir)rationality when applied to him by others.

Certain analyses of justification do not capture the regulative concept (even if they capture another): they admit of cases in which one may properly hold onto a belief one knows to be 'unjustified'. Thus, in the wake of Nozick's theory of knowledge, Dancy (1985, p. 39) has suggested the following subjunctive analysis of justification. A belief is justified, according to Dancy, if and only if it would be knowledge were it true.

Knowing that in a counterfactual situation in which **q** is true it fails to be knowledge needn't motivate me to revoke my belief in it. It needn't impugn the reason I now have; it being, for instance, deducible (or inducible) from other beliefs of mine. This point can be illustrated by the demon hypothesis.

Denote by p my ordinary beliefs, such as 'There is a table in front of me', and let **q** be the negation of the demon hypothesis. My belief in q is not knowledge in the actual world (or in near ones), because it doesn't track the truth: if I were deluded, I would still think I wasn't. But this needn't motivate me to revoke it. I have (properly, so far as I can tell) deduced **q** from **p**. Of course, I might be persuaded to mistrust my logical competence, or the premise on which the deduction is based. But this is not inevitable.

I need doubt my logical acumen only if the (counterfactual) situation in which it is faulty is (epistemically) probable. The demon hypothesis, clearly, isn't. Consequently, the fact that I would not reason logically if I were being deluded by a demon doesn't engender doubts about my present logical competence. My premise, furthermore, is justified. Indeed, it is (subjunctively) 'justified', being knowledge in the actual world (and in near ones): if there wasn't a table in front of me (because, for instance, I were sitting in a different room), I wouldn't believe there was one. I have, therefore, full confidence in my premise, my deduction, and in the beliefs acquired through them.

A belief being (subjunctively) 'unjustified' is not constitutive of it being unwarranted. It is, at best, *evidence* (for the agent and others) that it should be revoked. The evidence may be overridden. Indeed, it must be sometimes, because (subjunctive) 'justification' isn't closed under known implication: the conclusion may (knowably) fail to be 'justified', even if the premises are. Rational belief, on the other hand, is closed under known implication: the knowledge that a conclusion deductively follows from premises one (justifiably) believes suffices to warrant the belief in the conclusion.[2]

Such a principle is implicitly assumed in deductive reasoning. If it wasn't, we would need at each stage, having derived a conclusion from accepted premises, to justify its acceptance (by an appeal to Nozickian (1981, p. 231) counterfactuals?). But, of course, we need do no such thing. If I deduce **q** from $\{\mathbf{p}, \mathbf{p} \mid\rightarrow \mathbf{q}\}$, I can give up one or both premises, rather than accept the conclusion. But once the premises are granted, nothing further is required to warrant the conclusion.

The biggest threat to this claim is provided by the lottery paradox (Kyburg, 1961). But the paradox can be eliminated within

[2] The Dutch book argument is used to support the stronger claim that we are *obliged*, rather than merely permitted, to believe in the consequences of our (rationally held) beliefs.

a Bayesian framework, dispensing with the notion of acceptance, while preserving an analogous principle with respect to rational degrees of belief: if **p** is known to entail **q**, then one may attach as much confidence to **q**'s truth as one does to **p**'s.[3]

The inadequacy of Dancy's principle of justification is not due to its externalist (Nozick, 1981, pp. 264 ff.) nature. To be sure, an externalist theory of justification cannot be regulative (Bonjour, 1980), because it determines the justification of a belief by reference to *epistemically unconstrained* relations (typically causal or nomological) obtaining between the believer and the world. A belief may, therefore, be externalistically justified for a person who erroneously (but reasonably) judges it not to satisfy the relevant condition (reliable acquisition, say). He ought, in such circumstances, to revoke the belief. If, conversely, he falsely (but with good warrant) judges a belief to satisfy the condition, he ought – *ceteris paribus* – to retain it, failure of externalistic justification notwithstanding.

So much for the (epistemological) inadequacy of externalist theories of justification. Dancy's principle is flawed even when construed internalistically. The features by which it determines justification are simply the wrong ones, even when available to the believer; (defeasible) evidence for, rather than constitutive of, justification.

Epistemology, whether conceived as an anti-sceptical enterprise, or as regulating belief-formation, must take (regulative) justification as its fundamental concept. Of course, justification isn't the final aim of cognition. We aim to have true beliefs, and justification has value only because it is conducive to truth. But justification is the only guide one has to truth. One ought, that is, to believe precisely those propositions one is justified in believing.[4]

[3] We may probabilistically account for the ordinary use of 'accept' in one of two ways. If construed very stringently (a proposition is 'accepted' iff its probablity is 1), acceptance will be deductively closed. If the threshold for acceptance is lower, deductive closure will not hold.

[4] This seeming truism must, in fact, be qualified. It is true only so long as one is motivated solely by truth-related reasons in forming one's beliefs. Decision-theoretic, rather than epistemological, considerations may account for belief formation directed towards other goals, as the following two examples illustrate. First, a terminally ill person may reasonably want to have a false belief about his situation: some beliefs are just too awful to have. Second, if persuaded by Pascal's argument, one will have a reason for believing in the existence of God, even if His existence is very unlikely. In both cases, the goal of the agent in forming his beliefs isn't cognitive (increasing truth and avoiding falsity), and he cannot bring about such a change without resorting to extra-rational measures (such as hypnosis or a religious life) to override his evidence.

IV

The first-person perspective is fundamental. Epistemology contends with a challenge to one's own claims. The challenge may be genuinely sceptical, or methodological, but it must be directed at one's own beliefs. There is nothing worrying about denying purported claims to justification (or knowledge) of someone else (one's own past and future self included). This does not mean that epistemology is egocentrically founded. The sceptic challenges my beliefs, but I may justify them by reference to public criteria of meaning, rationality, etc. It is the *target* of the sceptic which concerns me here, not the proper *response* to it.

The sceptic's claim that we have no warrant for many, indeed all, of our beliefs, and are incapable even of justifying one way of assigning probabilities to propositions over another is one we should attempt to rebut. It impinges most directly on our conduct as rational inquirers: a belief which is not justified ought to be revoked. In contrast, we *shouldn't* be perturbed by knowledge-scepticism, unless it is founded on doubts about the possibility of justification. Belief formation goes by justification. If a person can brand his own justified belief as a failure of knowledge, he shouldn't revoke it, failing as it does to be knowledge. He should, rather, retain it, because it is justified.

Is this a dilemma we could ever face? The locution 'I justifiably believe **p**, but I do not know that **p**' may seem absurd. But intuitions waver, more so under pressure of examples (section VI), and this is not surprising. There is, we have seen, no univocal sense of 'know' to be captured by a philosophical analysis. We have already noted that the concept is applied more or less stringently in different contexts. But it harbours other ambiguities as well. There is, no doubt, a sense of 'know' in which the concept may be applied where the question of justification doesn't arise at all. It is the sense in which the term is applied to animals ('Fido knows where the bone is'), and even to inanimate objects ('The electron "knows" where the slit is').

V

What about reflective believers, who consider the warrant for their beliefs? Is a divergence between knowledge and justified belief from the first-person perspective possible for them? Not according to the traditional analysis of knowledge as true justified belief; quite straightforwardly according to more recent analyses.

Austin belittled the cognitive content of knowledge claims. He argued that in claiming to know, one was simply expressing one's belief, with an additional *performative* component (1961, p. 67, original italics):

> . . . saying 'I know' is taking a new plunge. But it is *not* saying 'I have performed a specially striking feat of cognition, superior, in the same scale as believing and being sure': for there is nothing in that scale superior to being quite sure . . . When I say 'I know', *I give others my word: I give others my authority for saying* that 'S is p'.

Austin was wrong in claiming there was nothing superior to believing. There is: justifiably believing. The performative component, the recommendation to others of the belief in question, is, surely, backed by the speaker's *affirmation* that he has the proper authority for it. If a knowledge claim includes a performative component, it cannot merely be an affirmation of belief. It must include, as an *assertoric* component, a claim of justification.

The justification claim may seem redundant. There is, perhaps, something odd about the utterance 'I am sure that **p**, but my confidence is misplaced'. But the initial feeling of oddness must be overcome. Usually, of course, in judging a belief to be unjustified, we are already disowning it, initiating its revocation. But Hume's sceptic judges as unwarranted many of his beliefs which he is (psychologically) incapable of giving up. And even if one must judge one's confidence to be justified, in affirming **p** one is – ipso facto – *claiming* justification.

According to the standard analysis of knowledge (true justified belief), a knowledge claim just *is* a claim of justification. To see this, note that a justified belief fails to be (traditionally construed) knowledge iff it is false. Now, I can consistently judge someone else's justified belief to be false. But from the first-person perspective, belief is indistinguishable from truth. I cannot judge false my own belief. To believe **p** just *is* to believe **p** true.[5]

Within the standard analysis, therefore, the sceptical challenge to a knowledge claim reduces to a justificatory challenge, and this

[5] Dorothy Edgington has pointed out that this is not, strictly speaking, true. We can agree with Moore in thinking pragmatically paradoxical the assertion 'p is true but I don't believe it'. But the utterance 'I believe p and p is false' makes perfectly good sense, since one might discover that one unconsciously believes p without consciously believing it. One's unconscious self must be treated, in the present context, as doxastically distinct, on a par with one's past and future selves. One *can* judge false one's unconscious belief, but cannot thus distance oneself from one's *conscious* belief.

both explains and justifies the central position of the concept of knowledge in traditional epistemology. If in claiming to know **p**, I am adding nothing to the claim that my belief in **p** is justified, then a challenge to this claim is – ipso facto – a challenge to justification, and that is a challenge with which I need to contend. From the point of view of the standard analysis, knowledge-scepticism matters, but needs no special attention: we will have responded to the challenge it poses when we have answered the justification-sceptic.

Reliability theories of knowledge will, typically, allow first-person knowledge and true justified belief to diverge. Of course, in attributing (reliabilist) knowledge to oneself, one will be judging one's belief to be justified. If I think my belief was reliably acquired, I can have no overriding consideration motivating its revocation.[6] But the converse possibility easily arises. I can judge my justified true belief, recent analyses of knowledge entail, as a failure of knowledge. (In Gettier's (1963) examples, we judge this of *someone else's* true justified beliefs.)

Nozick's theory, for instance, allows first-person divergence between justification and knowledge, as the demon-hypothesis attests. We are justified, Nozick claims, in the belief that we are not deluded by an evil demon: it is a belief got via the most reliable method available to us (1981, p. 265). Not only is the belief justified, Nozick argues; he would stake his life on it (1981, p. 220). However, our best available method doesn't, in this case, yield knowledge: our belief does not track the truth. We ourselves judge our justified belief to be a failure of knowledge.

Such theories of knowledge may, of course, be inadequate. Functional considerations (section II) could, perhaps, be wielded to decide the issue. Is the role of the concept of knowledge consonant with such a divergence? Does it, perhaps, require it? If, as Craig (1987) suggests, knowers are reliable informants, then divergence between justification and knowledge is to be expected in the case of other believers. We can see why, from the perspective of an inquirer, a (true) belief which isn't justified may count as

[6] Knowledge only guarantees regulative justification. Dancy's (1985) subjunctive justification is not necessary for (truth-tracking) knowledge. According to Nozick, to know that p, it is sufficient that one believe it in all the nearest (unactual) possible worlds in which p is true (call this set W), and disbelieve it in all the nearest worlds in which it is false. But in order for the belief in p to be justified, according to Dancy, it has to be *knowledge* in all the worlds in W. And this is clearly a stronger condition than that imposed by his belief in p being knowledge in the actual world. Another way of seeing this is by noting that in order to determine whether the belief in p in some W-world is knowledge, we have to look beyond W.

knowledge. If Jones believes that his belief is unwarranted, he ought to relinquish it. But I may have reasons which are unavailable to him (information about the method by which the belief was acquired, for instance), which lead *me* to adopt the belief myself, rendering him a reliable informant, and his unjustified (true) belief – a case of knowledge.

What about first-person divergence? Must I characterise as knowledge my own justified belief? Could a person, thinking his *own* belief to be fully warranted, nonetheless judge himself an unreliable informant with respect to it? If I cannot recommend the belief to others, how can I embrace it myself? If such is the function of the concept of knowledge, then the very divergence a theory allows between first-person knowledge and justification will count against it.

We must, of course, remember that such functional considerations depend on a *hypothesis* about the concept of knowledge, a hypothesis which might be rejected. Craig could, after all, be wrong about the role of the term, just as *we* may be wrong about some intuitive ascription of the concept, or the sceptic – about the conditions of its application.

VI

Epistemologists, we are often told, are interested in justification because of its relation to knowledge. But I have argued that justification is epistemologically fundamental. Need we concern ourselves with knowledge at all? Knowledge has been epistemologically dethroned. To see whether it is to be banished altogether, whether we should care about *what* we know, we should ask what we mean by 'knowing'. The investigation into the semantics of 'know' will shed light on the plausibility and significance of knowledge-scepticism. Even while being made credible, it may be rendered inconsequential.

Knowledge may be a scarce commodity if, for instance, our semantic investigation upholds the sceptic's contention that knowledge requires warranted certainty, because even if certainty is not always irrational, it very often is. And even if knowledge does not require certainty, only one who is fairly confident about a proposition's truth can know it. Perhaps we can wrest some beliefs from the clutches of the knowledge-sceptic, but a mitigated form of knowledge-scepticism can, still, be upheld: scientific knowledge will be very restricted if we are seldom justified in according

scientific theories degrees of belief high enough to count as knowledge.

Other beliefs may fall prey to the sceptic. According to Nozick, for instance, statistically-based beliefs are not knowledge. Were I going to win the lottery, I wouldn't believe it, because the nearest worlds in which that happens are, plausibly, those in which I have the same (probabilistic) evidence about the lottery. My belief, 'I won't win the lottery', is, therefore, not knowledge, although it is true and justified.

Of course, we may refuse to call this a case of belief. Within a Bayesian framework, high as the number of tickets in the lottery might be, I will assign a probability less than 1 to the proposition, so in a technical sense, it won't be a case of full belief. Now, this will be a departure from ordinary usage. Partial belief shades into ordinary belief before becoming certain, and a sufficiently high degree of belief is belief *simpliciter*. But, anyway, whether or not this is a case of full belief, or just a high degree of belief, it is not knowledge.

Might not a statistically-based belief track the truth? The world in which I win the (deterministic) lottery must differ from the actual one even before the lottery takes place. In such a world, the evidence I have regarding the lottery might be different, so the counterfactual 'Had I been going to win the lottery, I would have believed it' might be true. This (feeble) way of resisting the sceptical Nozickian conclusion with respect to statistically-based beliefs is not available in non-deterministic contexts. One of the possible worlds in which I win in a non-deterministic lottery is physically identical with the actual world up to the time of the draw, and is, hence, unequivocally *the* unique nearest possible world in which I ought to believe in my winning. Yet, the same objective chance will lead me in that world to believe that I won't win.

Belief, full or partial, in non-deterministic contexts, based on the *best available* evidence won't be knowledge, because the evidence is ineliminably statistical. If quantum indeterminism pervades all macroscopic phenomena, there may not be *any* empirical knowledge pertaining to the future.

Knowledge-scepticism, it seems, may be quite plausible. On certain accounts of knowledge, the sceptical conclusion is hard to avoid. What about its significance? If I am right about the regulative role of justification, then by showing how knowledge and justification may diverge even from the (epistemologically distin-

guished) first-person perspective, and thereby stripping knowledge of its regulative role, an adequate theory of knowledge will undermine its epistemological importance.

Even if degrees of belief in propositions about the non-deterministic are not knowledge, they may be justified (for instance, if they are based on objective probabilities), and that is all we need for rationality, both cognitive and practical. We are epistemically virtuous if our confidence is judiciously distributed, and our behaviour is rational if it promotes our aims, given our (partial) beliefs, whether or not these count as knowledge.

Knowledge may be rare, even non-existent. If, as Plato (*Republic* 476–9) and Descartes thought, knowledge must be infallible, there will be very little knowledge: we no longer think we have many (indeed, any) infallible beliefs. Similarly, knowledge may require certainty of a strong kind, which we seldom, if ever, attain. If (Unger, 1971) 'hardly anyone . . . is certain that 45 and 56 are 101', then '. . . every human being knows, at best, hardly anything to be so'. We can easily concede Unger's claim that we do not have knowledge, so long as 'there is much that many of us correctly and reasonably believe'. If such is our concept of knowledge, then knowledge-scepticism is no longer an 'unpopular thesis [which] simply must be false', but a true one, which we may embrace equanimously.

Of course, it would be nice to know that a belief is logically incapable of being mistaken: that is the strongest kind of justification. But our (regulative) concept of justification may be less demanding. How stringent is it? And what are its demands? These are the substantial questions epistemology must address. If justification requires a logical guarantee of truth, so that 'there is at most very little in which one will be justified or reasonable' (Unger, 1975, p. 199), we are genuinely discomfited; our claim to rationality undermined. It is such *justification* sceptics we must engage, rather than those (Kekes 1975, Lehrer 1971), who deny that we know anything.

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