

MYTHOLOGY OF THE FACTIVE

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ABSTRACT: It's a cornerstone of epistemology that knowledge requires truth—that is, that knowledge is factive. Allan Hazlett boldly challenges orthodoxy by arguing that the ordinary concept of knowledge is not factive. On this basis Hazlett further argues that epistemologists shouldn't concern themselves with the ordinary concept of knowledge, or knowledge ascriptions and related linguistic phenomena. I argue that either Hazlett is wrong about the ordinary concept of knowledge, or he's right in a way that leaves epistemologists to carry on exactly as they have, paying attention to much the same things they always did.

KEYWORDS: knowledge, factivity, knowledge ascriptions, philosophical method, Allan Hazlett

1.

One of the very few things that epistemologists of all stripes agree on is that knowledge requires truth—or as it's often put, that knowledge is *factive*. We have seen controversy over whether knowledge requires justification and whether knowledge requires belief,¹ but not whether it requires truth. All proposed definitions or analyses of knowledge (or 'knowledge') include a clause to the effect that you know something only if it is true. And even those who deny that knowledge (or 'knowledge') admits of analysis agree that knowledge is factive.² As Donald Davidson once put it, "Everyone agrees that what is known must be true."³

¹ E.g., Stephen Hetherington, "Is This a World Where Knowledge Has to Include Justification?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75, 1 (2007): 41–69, Crispin Sartwell, "Why Knowledge Is Merely True Belief," *The Journal of Philosophy* 89, 4 (1992): 167–180, and Colin Radford "Knowledge: By Examples," *Analysis* 27, 1 (1966): 1–11.

² E.g. Timothy Williamson *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ Donald Davidson, "Epistemology and Truth," in his *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 177.

But in innovative recent work Allan Hazlett⁴ challenges orthodoxy by arguing that, in the ordinary sense of ‘knows,’ it *is* possible to know false claims: the ordinary concept of knowledge is not factive. On this basis Hazlett further argues that epistemologists shouldn’t interest themselves in the ordinary concept of knowledge or knowledge ascriptions and related linguistic phenomena. Thus in addition to the substantive *conceptual* challenge Hazlett poses to orthodoxy about the connection between knowledge and truth, he also poses a significant *methodological* challenge to contemporary epistemologists, who often appeal to ordinary thought and talk to help guide their theorizing about knowledge.

We can represent Hazlett’s main argument as follows.⁵

1. Any non-factive concept of knowledge is epistemologically uninteresting. (Premise)
2. The ordinary concept of knowledge is non-factive. (Premise)
3. So the ordinary concept of knowledge is epistemologically uninteresting. (From 1 and 2)
4. If the ordinary concept of knowledge is epistemologically uninteresting, then ordinary knowledge ascriptions are epistemologically uninteresting. (Premise)

⁴ Allan Hazlett, “The Myth of Factive Verbs,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 80, 3 (2010): 497–522.

⁵ The following passage comes close to expressing all at once what I’m calling Hazlett’s main argument:

“If I’m right in my criticism of Factivity, then epistemologists will have to look elsewhere for support for the truth condition [on knowledge]. But more importantly, if I’m right, then epistemologists may have reason to stop looking at linguistic phenomena altogether—at least if they want to keep working on anything like the standard analysis of knowledge. The concept of knowledge that epistemologists have been interested in since the *Meno* is a factive concept (in the sense that nothing false can be known). But, if I’m right, the concept of knowledge that serves as the meaning of ‘knows’ in ordinary talk isn’t. This is strong prima facie evidence that traditional epistemology shouldn’t be especially interested in the concept of knowledge that serves as the meaning of ‘knows’ in ordinary talk ... For the epistemologist is interested in an *epistemic* concept of knowledge, if she is interested in a concept of knowledge at all. What I’m claiming is that epistemologists have every right to insist that knowledge (as they understand it) is factive—but the price to pay for this (which many will be happy to incur) is to give up the linguistic method described above. I’m suggesting, in other words, a divorce for the linguistic theory of knowledge attributions and traditional epistemology.” (Hazlett, “The Myth,” 499–500.)

5. So ordinary knowledge ascriptions are epistemologically uninteresting. (From 4 and 5)

The argument is valid. Two questions remain: “are the premises true?” and “how significant is the conclusion?”

In what follows I challenge Hazlett’s argument on both fronts. Here’s the plan for the rest of the paper. Section 2 argues against premise 1. Sections 3 and 4 argue against premise 2. Section 5 presents a dilemma: either the argument’s soundness provides no reason for epistemologists to refrain from appealing to ordinary language, or premise 2 is false.

2.

Let’s begin with 1. Hazlett spends virtually no time defending it. Yet 1 is doubtful in at least one respect. Suppose that the philosopher’s concept of knowledge is factive and the ordinary concept non-factive. For all Hazlett says, this could be the *only* difference between them, in which case the ordinary concept would so greatly resemble the philosopher’s concept that epistemologists would do well to study it carefully. Epistemologists could profitably use intuitions about the ordinary concept to constrain theorizing about the philosophical concept. In short, a non-factive concept of knowledge could still be epistemologically interesting.⁶

3.

This brings us to premise 2. Consider these specimens of ordinary language.

K1. Everyone knew that stress caused ulcers, before two Australian doctors in the early 80s proved that ulcers are actually caused by bacterial infection.⁷

K2. He figures anything big enough to sink the ship they’re going to see in time to turn. But the ship’s too big, with too small a rudder ... it can’t corner worth shit. Everything he knows is wrong.⁸

⁶ You might want to reconsider this possibility in light of discussion in section 5, which proposes a possible distinction between ‘knows’ and ‘knows it is true.’

⁷ Quoted by Hazlett, adapted from J. Achenbach, “Cat Carrier: Your Cat Could Make You Crazy,” *National Geographic* 208 (2005).

⁸ Quoted by Hazlett, Brock to Bodine in *Titanic*.

K3. A man stole something. He is brought in before the emperor. He throws himself down on the ground. He begs for mercy. He knows he's going to die. And the emperor pardons him. He's a worthless man—he lets him go.⁹

Given that we find these and similar statements acceptable, we should want a theory that classifies them as acceptable. Hazlett argues that the best explanation of their acceptability is that they could be true, which he takes to be good evidence for 2. Grant that they could be true, and grant also that this helps explain their acceptability. Whether this favors 2 depends on how we understand K1–K3. I will now present readings of K1–K3, on which they turn out true, but do not involve a non-factive sense of 'knows.'

Consider K1. It doesn't even contain an occurrence of 'know' or 'knows;' rather, it features 'knew.' But set that aside. Consider "Everyone knew that stress causes ulcers." If they literally mean *everyone*, then the statement is clearly false. Rather, they mean *some* people knew. Did these people know that stress caused *all* ulcers, or merely *some* ulcers? Let's settle on the 'some' reading, so we can interpret them as speaking truthfully. Now consider "Two Australian doctors proved that ulcers are caused by bacterial infection." Did they prove that bacterial infection causes *all* ulcers or merely *some*? Again, let's settle on the 'some' reading for truth's sake. So we can read K1 as:

K1'. Some people knew that stress caused some ulcers, before two Australian doctors proved that bacterial infection causes some ulcers.

We can understand K1 as true without understanding 'knew' non-factively.

Alternatively, we would be within our rights to dismiss K1 as a case of overstatement, beginning with the obviously false claim about *everyone*, and continuing with the attribution of knowledge.

Consider K2, starting with "He figures anything big enough to sink the ship they're going to see in time to turn." This is true. They did have time to turn, which does *not* entail that they would have enough time to *turn in such a way as to completely avoid the iceberg*. Now consider "Everything he knows is wrong." Here we needn't understand 'wrong' to mean 'false.' Instead we could understand it to mean 'ill-suited for the task at hand,' the task being *to avoid the fateful*

⁹ Oscar Schindler to Amon Goeth, in *Schindler's List*. Note that Hazlett does not present this example, and he informs me that he would not use examples like this one (involving 'is going to' or 'was about to'), for precisely the reasons I offer below.

iceberg. We can understand K2 as true without understanding ‘knows’ non-factively.

Consider K3. It is true that the thief is going to die, so we can understand K3 as true without understanding ‘knows’ non-factively. Alternatively, and perhaps more naturally in the context, we could understand “He knows he’s going to die” to mean “He knows that the emperor is about to have him killed.” That still doesn’t require a non-factive reading for ‘knows.’ For it can be true that the emperor *was about to have him killed* but instead changed his mind. In order to be ‘about to’ perform some act, it suffices that you fully intend—and, perhaps, are actually able—to do it momentarily. You needn’t actually perform the act.

Clear examples of non-factive uses of ‘knows’ in ordinary language are difficult to come by. Actually, that’s not true. There are clear examples whose truth would require a non-factive reading. But they don’t serve Hazlett’s purpose because they seem obviously false. For example:

K4. Back in the Middle Ages, people knew the Earth was flat, even though it wasn’t, since it has always been spherical.

Taken literally, this sounds contradictory.¹⁰ If anything serious hinged on the truth of this statement, I would object: “You don’t *really* mean they knew. You mean that they *thought* they knew, or some such thing.” If the person insisted that he ‘literally meant’ exactly what he said, I would question whether he was using ‘literally’ literally. Supposing he answered affirmatively and I believed him, I would conclude that he was incompetent or confused.

What we should like, but do not yet have, are clear examples of non-factive uses of ‘knows’ from ordinary language, which at least do not strike many as obviously false.

I want to avoid giving the impression that this is merely an intuition stalemate about particular examples. I granted that K1–K3 are all true, but then showed that this doesn’t require giving them a non-factive reading. It’s only when we come to examples like K4 that I find myself wondering if any good literal sense can be made of the statement.¹¹ And I trust this is not an unfair or idiosyncratic response to such statements, since Hazlett feels compelled to offer an explanation of why they strike us as distinctly odd. I consider Hazlett’s explanation in the next section.

¹⁰ I discuss Hazlett’s alternative view of such utterances in the next section.

¹¹ Others inform me that they wonder the same about K1–K3, and they are of course entitled to that response. But I prefer a more ecumenical response, to the extent possible.

4.

Suppose you ask what Dick knows about Iran's nuclear program. Condi responds, "Well, he knows that Iran has built a nuclear bomb, although they haven't built one." Condi's response sounds awful. Why is that? Orthodoxy provides a ready explanation: it sounds awful because Condi manifestly contradicts herself. Dick knows that Iran has built a nuclear bomb only if it is true that Iran has built a nuclear bomb. Condi says he knows, yet in the same breath denies that a necessary condition on his knowing has been satisfied.

The orthodox explanation is unavailable to Hazlett. He aims to explain the infelicity some other way. He says that uttering "S knows that Q" *typically implies* that Q is true. To demonstrate this, he invokes Gricean conversational rules, along with several proposed conditions on knowledge, epistemic warrant, and knowledge ascriptions.

First, let's state the Gricean approach's essentials. People generally assume that their conversational partners are cooperative. Conversational cooperation requires general and mutually assumed conformance to at least three rules:

The Rule of Quality: Don't say anything you believe to be false, or which you don't have reason to believe is true.

The Rule of Quantity: Make your contribution to a conversation as informative, and only as informative, as is required.

The Rule of Relation: Make your contribution to the conversation relevant.

Next, Hazlett's theory involves two necessary conditions on knowledge (in the ordinary sense of 'knowledge') and knowledge ascriptions, the relevant one for present purposes being:

(NF2) An utterance of 'S knows that Q' is true only if S possesses epistemic warrant for her belief that Q.¹²

Finally, Hazlett claims it is necessarily true that warranted beliefs are reliably produced. And of course reliably produced belief can be false.

Having set those three pieces in place, let's consider Hazlett's alternative explanation, which focuses on the following case. A and B are local police officers investigating a recent bombing. They have the following conversation:

¹² Hazlett leaves open the possibility that there are more necessary conditions on knowledge.

A: Any information from the FBI about how the bomb was constructed?

B: They know the bomb was homemade.

In a key passage Hazlett comments:

Since it is mutually assumed that speakers are conforming to Quantity and Relation, B here implies that she believes that the bomb was homemade, and that she wishes her interlocutor to believe this as well—for otherwise she would say, of the FBI, that they think that the bomb was homemade, but that they are wrong, or something to that effect. To attribute knowledge is to say something that entails that the FBI possesses epistemic warrant for their belief that the bomb was homemade. Recall that A is assuming that B will say (and only say) what is relevant. If B thinks that the bomb was not homemade, despite the FBI's warranted belief that it is, then she should not say anything that entails that their belief is warranted, i.e. anything that would misleadingly suggest to A that their belief is true, unless she were to explicitly add that their belief isn't true. Given that she doesn't add that caveat, she implies that the FBI's belief is true.¹³

Put simply, knowledge requires warranted belief, it is a conceptual truth that warranted beliefs tend to be true, A and B are at least implicitly sensitive to these epistemic facts, and they reasonably assume mutual conformance to the conversational rules. So in ascribing knowledge to the FBI without explicitly canceling the suggestion that what the FBI knows is true, B implies that the FBI's belief is true.

Hazlett's explanation leaves us with at least one puzzle. Had B responded, "They know the bomb was homemade, although (they're wrong about that because) it wasn't homemade," it would have sounded awful. But why should directly canceling the implication sound awful? Generally speaking, we can directly and felicitously cancel an implication, even when its source is conceptual. It is a conceptual truth that rush hour traffic tends to be heavy (at least by local standards), so saying "I drove home in rush hour traffic" may well imply that I encountered heavy traffic on the way home. Yet directly canceling that implication presents no problem: "I drove home in rush hour traffic, though happily it was very light" sounds fine. It is a conceptual truth that nearly all participants in a large, fair, single-winner lottery lose, so when speaking of such a lottery, saying "I played the lottery" may well imply that I lost. Yet directly

¹³ Hazlett, "The Myth," 512–13.

canceling that implication presents no problem: “I played the lottery, but I didn’t lose!” sounds fine (in more ways than one).

Hazlett’s approach also faces a further challenge, which I’ll demonstrate by modifying his case. Suppose that A and B are terrorist moles who made the bomb in a sophisticated facility in Virginia. They have arranged things so that the FBI has a reliably produced, and hence warranted, false belief that the bomb was homemade. A and B both know all this, and each knows that they both know. Thus if B says of the FBI, “They know it was homemade,” it will suggest neither that the bomb was homemade, nor that she believes that it was homemade, nor that she wishes A to believe that it was homemade. Now imagine the following conversation:

A: Has the FBI learned anything about how the bomb was constructed?

B: They know the bomb was homemade.

B’s utterance here seems false. Why? We are prone to mistake misleading statements for false ones, but that explanation won’t work in the present case; given the background, B cannot misleadingly suggest that the FBI’s belief is true. On Hazlett’s behalf, one might argue that B’s utterance violates the Rule of Quantity. She and A already know that the FBI had a warranted belief that the bomb was homemade, which entails that the FBI knew it was homemade,¹⁴ so B’s utterance is uninformative. But this is too quick, for Hazlett never says that reliably produced belief *suffices* for knowledge.¹⁵ However, even supposing that it does suffice, it wouldn’t follow that B’s utterance was uninformative. After all, it can be informative to point out things entailed by what we all know. And A might not yet have drawn the relevant inference. Hazlett’s machinery fails to explain what’s wrong with B’s utterance in this case.

By contrast the orthodox view of knowledge easily explains it: knowledge obviously requires truth, so not only is B’s utterance false but B also violates the Rule of Quality, since she knows that the FBI’s belief fails the truth condition. Her assertion contradicts common knowledge.

To sum up this section: Hazlett offers an alternative explanation for why non-factive uses of ‘knows’ sound odd to us, but this alternative explanation can

¹⁴ That is, the *proposition known* entails it.

¹⁵ He has suggested as much in unpublished work, but I will not categorically attribute it to him in the present context, since it is not his official position. Here I restrict myself to the view he articulates in “The Myth of Factive Verbs.”

handle only a limited range of cases. By contrast, the orthodox position that knowledge is factive can adequately and uniformly explain all such cases.

5.

This section poses a dilemma for Hazlett's argument. The upshot: either the soundness of his argument poses no obstacle to epistemologists properly appealing to ordinary language, or premise 2 of the argument is false. Either way, his argument does not give epistemologists "reason to stop looking at linguistic phenomena altogether."

Philosophers haven't always distinguished *knows* and *knows for certain*, which I suspect has led many to mistakenly think that knowledge requires certainty.¹⁶ This mistake, when put together with the commonsense claim that we can be certain of very little, makes skepticism about knowledge attractive. Knowing for certain quite obviously requires certainty, but simply knowing does not. You can know something even if you don't know it for certain. Correlatively, the verb 'knows' expresses a different relation than does 'knows for certain.' Expressions of the form "I know that Q, although I don't know *for certain*" are felicitous. But expressions of the form "I know for certain that Q, although I don't know it" sound flat-out contradictory. It works the same for third-person ascriptions.

K5. She knows that Bush will invade Iran, although she doesn't know for certain that he will.

K6. She knows for certain that Bush will invade Iran, although she doesn't know that he will.

K5 is fine, and could well be true. K6 is contradictory.

We not only say things like "You know that Dick wants to invade Iran," but we also say things like "You know it's true that Dick wants to invade Iran." Must we also distinguish between *knows* and *knows it's true*? Correlatively, do 'knows' and 'knows it is true' express different concepts (or relations)? This brings us to the dilemma.

On the one hand, suppose they do express different concepts. Then we may charitably understand philosophers to be interested in the concept expressed by

¹⁶ See e.g. G.E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Collier Books, 1959), chs. 9–10. Peter Unger has a different take on such sentences. See Peter Unger, *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 99.

'knows it is true,' and epistemologists may properly appeal to usage of 'knows it is true' and the concept it ordinarily expresses to constrain and guide epistemological theorizing. This would remain true *even if* Hazlett's argument about 'knows' is sound. Instead of appealing to the one sort of knowledge ascription ("S knows that Q"), we would simply appeal to the other ("S knows it's true that Q"). Moreover distinguishing between 'knows' and 'knows it is true' would provide Hazlett with a ready diagnosis of why philosophers mistakenly thought that knowledge is factive: just as they mistook a requirement of *knowing for certain* as a requirement of *knowing*, they likewise mistook a requirement of *knowing it is true* for a requirement of *knowing*.¹⁷

Doubtless you can know it is true that Q only if it is true that Q. The evidence for this is not that 'knows it is true' contains 'it is true,' because then 'believes it is true' would likewise be factive, which it certainly is not. Rather the evidence is that it is intuitively obvious. We may occasionally say things like,

K7. People used to know that the Earth is flat,

which many judge acceptable, which in turn might provide some evidence for thinking that 'knows' is non-factive. If a philosopher says that 'knows' (or knowledge) is obviously factive, she at least owes us an explanation of why some judge K7 acceptable. But we never say things like:

K8. Some cultures know it's true that the Earth is flat.

K9. I just knew it was true that Kucinich was going to win, but it was false.

We exhibit no linguistic behavior that would cause us to doubt the powerful intuition that 'knows it is true' is factive.

On the other hand, suppose that 'knows' and 'knows it is true' do not express different concepts, but instead express the same concept. In that case, 'knows' is factive because 'knows it is true' is factive. And premise 2 of Hazlett's argument is false.

Either way, then, whether 'knows' and 'knows it is true' express different concepts or not, Hazlett's argument does not provide epistemologists with good reason to ignore ordinary thought and talk about knowledge.

¹⁷ Note: I distinguish between 'knows it is true that Q' and 'knows that Q is true.' If my suggestion in this horn of the dilemma is correct, then although you could *know that Q is true* even though it is false that Q is true, you could not *know it is true that Q* even though Q is false.