

SHOULD KNOWLEDGE BE DEFINED AS JUSTIFIED TRUTH BELIEF?

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Should knowledge be defined as justified true belief?

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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the problem concerning the possibility of justifying our belief of what we think we know. A possible answer can be derived from the assumption that every process of knowledge (hence that ‘S knows that p ’) can be summarized by the following conditions:

- X1) p is true
- X2) S believes that p

Where, in order to contrast the problems aroused by scepticism, a third condition is needed so to *justify* the possibility that ‘ S believes that p ’ (hence that ‘ S knows that p ’). Such justification pretends to define knowledge as a 1st personal issue where, given an *internal* view, its normative status derives. But as we will see further in this paper, several problems concerning the *Foundationalism* view arise. It will be appropriate then to consider some possibilities given by the *Externalist* analysis in order to avoid any possible sceptical argument by the dismissing of justification (Nozick’s *external theory of knowledge*) or by introducing a law-like connection between belief and truth (Armstrong’s *external theory of justification*). In this paper only the former will be properly analysed [III, IV], introducing the latter briefly at the end of IV.2.

It is important to note from the beginning that the conditions we shall define are not intended to convince the sceptic of the possibility of knowledge; they will define that knowledge is still possible even given the sceptic’s possibilities.

II. THE SCEPTIC PROBLEM AT A GLANCE.

A proper analysis of knowledge should always start with a defined understanding of the general position assumed by scepticism. And to do so, we will analyse the sceptic case against the *internal* view expressed by the normative possibility of justified true belief.

This view is stated by the ‘Principle of Closure’ [PC], which defines that:

$$(A) \quad PC': [Kap \ \& \ Ka(p \rightarrow q)] \rightarrow Kaq$$

With this principle we can determine the strongest form of sceptical argument that claims: “any defect in the notion of knowledge is equally present in that of justified belief”¹. Indeed, by analyzing (A) backward, given that ‘ a does not know that q ’ and that ‘ a does know that p implies q ’ allows us to infer that ‘ a does not know that p ’, so that:

$$(B) \quad PC'': [\sim Kaq \ \& \ Ka(p \rightarrow q)] \rightarrow \sim Kap$$

¹ J.Dancy, *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*, p.9

This is indeed the form of scepticism inferred by Descartes in the *First Meditation* where by taking q as ‘you are dreaming’ and any proposition p true whenever q is true, not knowing q entails not knowing p .

In order to find any possible contradiction in (b), we can either point out that the sceptical argument is not entirely *global*, so that knowledge is still possible by admitting at least that $p \rightarrow q$ (Dancy’s theory²); or follow Nozick’s ‘subjunctive condition’ for an *external* analysis of actual true beliefs.

III. NOZICK AND THE SUBJUNCTIVE CONDITION

Nozick’s theory considers the implausibility of ‘ S knows that p ’ in its being considered from the subject point of you. However, if our issue is only by denoting that p is not a matter of *simply* justified true belief but a matter of *fact*,

² By following Dancy’s analysis we define the impossibility of a global scepticism about both understanding and justified belief. This is possible by objecting some of the main sceptic positions in an *anti*-realistic way. Briefly, two possible sceptic arguments are the following:

- *The argument from error*: whereas my determining something as known is based on simple facts that are *evidence-transcendent*; so that even though my claim can be based on a false belief, doesn’t necessary entail the fact that such belief is unjustified. And therefore, no matter which attack is attempted by scepticism towards our knowledge, for our understanding will be still untouched.
- *The justification of arguments from experience*: for a sceptic argument can presuppose that I can have no reason to believe that my experience is a reliable guide, and hence have no reason for any belief about events. However, here we are not dealing with a global scepticism at all, for it is only referred to what is *unobserved*, hence our understanding remains, as in the previous case, untouched.

Indeed there is no possibility for a sceptic argument to deny that “it is not just that we clearly understand *something*, rather we know in advance that it is only by understanding the sceptic’s argument [...] that we could be led to believe that we understand nothing”². So that we can clearly agree that it would be impossible for us to understand the conclusion without realizing its falsity.

This way of approaching against scepticism is defined by Dancy as the *anti*-realistic one, where the possibility of existence of evidence-transcendent truth is denied [there is no difference that matter between p and $\sim p$; hence $\sim(D \& M)$]; in opposition with the realistic view [there is a difference but it does not matter between p and $\sim p$; hence $D \& \sim M$].

Indeed, by following an *anti*-realistic objection, we can prove that if there is not such thing as justified belief, there is no understanding at all, for “to *understand* a sentence is to be able to pick out situations which *justify in believing* that sentence to be true”².

So we can conclude that knowledge in a closure way can be defined as justified true belief as follow:

$$(C) \quad PC: [Uap \& Ka(p \rightarrow q)] \rightarrow Jbaq$$

Where ‘ a understands that p ’ and ‘ a knows that p implies q ’ so that ‘ a is justified in believing that q ’.

However, several problems arise. One is based on the implausibility of logical analysis in the Principle of Closure and in order to compete to such problem a better counterargument against scepticism is needed as shown in Nozick’s theory of knowledge in this paper.

an improvement of the basic conditions (X1 and X2 above) can let our analysis diverge from the subject to an observer point of view.

At this point a short digression into the problem of causation is required. Following the theory of *possible world semantics* described by Lewis (1973), we can determine a causal dependence between a cause (c) and its effect (e) through an analysis of counterfactual dependence of it (and represented by the family of propositions $O(c)$ and $O(e)$), which has no intrinsic meta-linguistic value, but that can support an equality between its ontological actuality and possibility. In other words, if we follow Hume's second statement "[...] *if the first object had not been, the second never had existed*"³ we define a connection between any possibility of " c causes e " and its actualisation within the boundaries of closest possible worlds in relation with w (which is the actual world).

Applying this theory to the epistemological problem we are then authorized to reconsider the possibility of knowledge expressed by the *Internal* view as 'justified true belief', in a subjunctive condition. This theory brings with it several consequences, first of all the elimination of the *fundamentalist* problem where the need of further justifications brings us to a vicious regression such that not even a self-justified belief can be a sufficient solution. We shall then apply this and other consequences to the problem proposed by Gettier at the end of this paper. It will be more useful for now to consider the following achievements:

- The improvement of the basic conditions (X1 and X2) [3.1];
- The consequent concept of '*tracking* the truth' [3.2] which redefines the epistemological problem;
- And the implausibility of logic analysis in the Principle of Closure [4.1] so to obtain a further proof of the validity of the *external* argument.

III.1. THE FOUR CONDITIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

By starting from the counterfactual condition that 'if p were not true, S would not believe that p ', Nozick introduces the third condition that can establish the subjunctive possibility of knowledge, so to obtain the following:

- (1) p is true
- (2) S believes that p
- (3) $\sim(1) \rightarrow \sim(2)$

However, as Nozick points out, "this condition does not rule out every problem case"⁴ for with (3) we can see only the value of belief in case of p 's falsity, but not in case of p 's being true. And indeed (as seen in (B) PC'': [$\sim Kaq \ \& \ Ka(p \rightarrow q)$] $\rightarrow \sim Kap$) it does not follow that ' S believes in p ' implies p 's being true.

We can then introduce a fourth condition, where if p were true, S would believe it. This fourth condition is strictly derived from (3) and it can be summarized as:

- 4) $(1) \rightarrow (2)$

Indeed, even though a sceptic argument could still assume that we do not yet objectively know that p , we define, with these four conditions, the fact that there is a belief, for:

- If it is true that p , then S believes it.
- If it weren't true that p , then S wouldn't believe it.
- If it were true that p , then S would believe it.

³ Hume, *Enquiry*, Section VII

⁴ Nozick, *Knowledge and Scepticism*, p.26

III.2. THE CONCEPT OF *TRACKING*

It is now possible to understand Nozick's definition of knowledge in relation with belief:

Knowledge is a particular way of being connected to the world,
having a specific real factual connection to the world: tracking it.⁵

So, by considering the conditions (3) and (4) in conjunction with the first two conditions, if (3) and (4) hold, then "his belief tracks the truth that p "; and it is then satisfied the condition that "to know is to have a belief that track the truth".

IV. THE POSSIBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE

At this point we can then conceive knowledge no more as a normative process where ' S knows that p ' iff ' S is justified in believing that p ', but as a condition in which, if a certain *fact* obtain, then the possibility of knowledge will never require any component of justification. It follows from this that if we can convert (A) PC' into the justified belief view, obtaining:

$$(D) \quad PC''': [JBap \ \& \ JBa(p \rightarrow q)] \rightarrow JBaq^6$$

Then, by showing the impossibility of [PC_n] we obtain a further proof in support of the *External* theory.

IV.1. THE FAILURE OF THE PRINCIPLE OF CLOSURE

By considering the principle of closure [PC], Nozick pointed out that it results wrong either if considered from a detailed analysis or under the logical implications it requires in order to be supported. Indeed "knowledge is not closed under known logical implication"⁷, for admitting the four conditions we do not imply the (logical) possibility that:

$$(3') \quad \text{if } q \text{ were not true, } S \text{ would not believe that } q$$

Indeed (3') represents a very different situation compared with (3) even though p entails q . And the difference between these possibilities implies the fact that even our belief of them may be very different.

To better understand this point, it is necessary to introduce the concept of *doxical identity*. Two situations are *doxically identical* for S iff he would have exactly the same belief in them. But if we now compare (3) and (3'), and we remark that it is p that entails q and not *vice versa*, p 's being true will be stronger than any consideration of q 's being false so, again, we cannot infer that our belief of p is equal to our possible belief of q for if we consider:

p : I am in x
 q : I am not in y

⁵ *Ibid*, p.28

⁶ J. Dancy, *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*, p.11

⁷ *Ibid*, p.37

We clearly see that p does entail q for ‘if p were false’ then q is still possibly true and I would not believe that p ; but if ‘ q were false’, then I would still believe that p and q not respecting therefore condition (3).

IV.2. CONCLUDING NOZICK’S THEORY

Then, if the Principle of Closure is in itself logically inconsistent, we can determine that (3) is not closed under known logical implications. But by doing so we are also answering the main question: *Should knowledge be defined as justified true belief?* And following Nozick’s theory of knowledge we can determine that:

- Knowledge is not *simply* true belief. If it were so, then ‘ S would not have a false belief that...’ will necessary be under known logical implication, which is not possible for it contradicts (3). And (3) is not closed under known logical implications.
- Knowledge is not under known logical implication for “‘a belief that p ’ is knowledge only if it somehow varies with the truth of p ”⁸.

In other words: if (3) and (4) hold, we obtain all the requirements to believe that p for if p weren’t true, we would have not believed that p . Therefore, we can conclude that by following the *External* analysis we are able to *cut* the SK⁹ issue of ‘what I have got available to me in order to know’ for we have seen so far that with the subjunctive condition it all becomes a *matter of fact* externalized from S , and therefore externalized even from the fact that (as pointed out by Descartes) we may or may not be dreaming while stating that p .

Armstrong gives another approach to the external theory¹⁰, by introducing the possibility of a *law-like* connection in order to compete with the issue of justification. Such a connection indeed represents what relates the truth with its belief; and by being the belief true, this implies that there is some external description of me and some true law of nature. Therefore my requirement of knowledge can be satisfied. For the epistemic justification depends on the appropriate relation between the true believer and the world.

This analysis, however, infers several objections as pointed out by L. Bonjour¹¹. Here instead, we shall analyse Gettier’s problem, showing that it is related with the problem of causal *pre-emption* and therefore, by solving the loss of transitivity in causal dependence but not in causation, the former can find its resolution. In order to support this view, I will briefly describe both Nozick’s and Dancy’s causal theory.

V. GETTIER’S PROBLEM

Gettier’s problem defines that knowledge is not justified true belief based on the assumption that even considering the three conditions for establishing that S knows that p :

- (i) p is true

⁸ *Ibid*, p.39

⁹ SK: Sceptical argument

¹⁰ D.M. Armstrong, ‘The Thermometer-Model of Knowledge’, in *Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (1973).

¹¹ L. Bonjour, *Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge*, from ‘Midwest Studies in Philosophy’ (1980).

- (ii) S believes that p
- (iii) S is justified in believing that p

We cannot achieve the sufficiency required for S to know that p and therefore a supplement condition is needed.

It is indeed possible for a person to be justified in believing that p even though p is false (so (iii) is still a *necessary* condition) but this doesn't entail that (iii) is sufficient for S to know that p .

However, two possibilities can help us to resolve this puzzle.

V.1. NOZICK AND THE INVALIDITY OF GETTIER'S POSSIBILITY

As we have seen before, by the usage of condition (3) we define the actualisation of true belief in the case in which 'if p were false, S would not believe in p '.

But given Gettier's example, namely that: considered x and y within z , where I believe Cx (x owns a car), but actually $\sim Cx \ \& \ Cy$ (y owns a car); my knowledge of $(\exists x) Cxz$ (somebody in z has got a car) is not justified true belief.

However, Nozick's third condition is not respected, for we assume that 'if $(\exists x) \sim Cxz$ then I wouldn't believe $(\exists x) Cxz$. But this is possible only if $\sim Cy$. However following Gettier's problem, I would still believe Cx . Therefore condition (3) excludes Gettier's case as an example of knowledge for Gettier considers the possibility for someone not to know even when (i), (ii) and (iii) are all satisfied. But again 'if p were false, S would not believe in p ' demonstrates this is not the case.

V.2. DANCY AND THE CAUSAL THEORY OF JUSTIFICATION

Analyzing any possibility in attempting to improve the three conditions (i), (ii) and (iii), Dancy considers, by following Goldman (1967), *The Causal Theory*¹². In this case my belief in $(\exists x) Cxz$ is not base on any truth, but by formulating a fourth possible condition for knowledge such that:

the fact that p should cause a 's belief that p .

We can then create a link between belief and truth with the consequence of resolving (by exclusion) Gettier's case.

V.3. CONCLUSION

In both cases [5.1 and 5.2] we have determined that by establishing a *causal chain* that lead from my belief and the validity of p , Gettier's case can be excluded as not reliable in the possibility of ' S knowing that p '. And indeed the subjunctive condition (3) is a derivation of the same sort of causality defined by Dancy. For it represents (as expressed by Lewis) the possibility of a counterfactual analysis of causal dependence where its transitivity can be defended for every case in which we can determine a *causal chain* between the event p and the event ' S believes that p ' in order to determine that ' S knows that p '.

¹² In addition with the possibility of *Relevant Falsehood* (whereas it is remarked that Knowledge can always depend on other possible gratuitous beliefs S may have, and therefore is an unsatisfactory theory); *Defeasibility* (whereas we require for our knowledge that the addition of further truths should not defeat p); *Reliability* (whereas however no infallible reliable method is anywhere possible); *Conclusive Reasons* (from which we can only define knowledge as a rare phenomenon).