Knowledge, Reason & Belief

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1. Course Introduction

LA TROBE
UNIVERSITY

General admin

- Course composition:
  - 2h lecture on Tuesdays, 3pm-5pm, Glenn College Davidson Rm
  - 1h discussion seminar on Wednesdays, 2pm-3pm, Glenn College Airport Lounge

  In the 6th & 12th weeks, the lecture will take the form of a review and the discussion seminar won't take place
- Assessment:
  - 2×1 600 word essays, each worth 40%, due Sept. 5th & Oct. 17th
  - 1 group presentation, worth 20%, on Oct. 26–27th
- If a serious adverse circumstance is affecting your performance or requires you to obtain an extension, please lodge an application for Special Consideration ($\leq$ 3 working days after due date)

General admin (ctd.)

- Textbook, available as ebook via library:

  Pritchard, D. 2014: *What Is This Thing Called Knowledge? (3rd Edition).* NY: Routledge.
- Weekly reading (see syllabus):
  - Required: typically 1 or 2 chapters of textbook
  - Recommended: primary sources and selected overviews
- Course materials on LMS: syllabus, lecture slides, readings, further resources (reading, writing, presentation advice)

Finally…

– Contact me *as soon as* you feel you are falling behind; don't wait until it's too late!
  – Office hours: Wednesdays 15:00-17:00, SS 312
  – Email: `jacob.chandler@latrobe.edu.au` (include 'PHI2KRB' in subject)

Epistemology

– Philosophical reflection on a cluster of concepts connected with the appraisal of belief and related mental states
– Examples:
  – knowledge
  – justification
  – wisdom
  – probability
  – rationality
  – information
  – evidence
  – reasonable doubt
  – proof

Epistemology (ctd.)

– Such reflection can be
  – semantic ('What does it mean to say something is a reason to believe something else?') or ontological ('What is the essence of knowledge?')
  – logical ('Does it follow, from the fact that I know that A and know that A implies B, that I know that B?')
  – axiological ('Is knowledge good in itself?') or deontic ('Ought one's beliefs be motivated by practical considerations?')
  – alethic ('Is it true that we know that we aren't in the Matrix?')

(We'll see that these questions are related: some answers to some questions preclude some answers to others)

This stuff matters

– Epistemological questions are both (a) interesting in themselves
  (I reckon!) and (b) relevant to practical matters
– Legal deliberation:
  – Standards of proof: What does it mean to say that something has
    been established beyond reasonable doubt?
  – Responsibility: When should we say that someone is culpably
    ignorant of the law?
– Science and industry:
  – Statistical testing: Is it rational to reject a hypothesis on the basis
    that it renders the data very improbable?
  – Database management: When altering the value of an item in a
    database, which potential repercussions on the remainder of the
    database should this change be permitted to have?
  – Expert opinion pooling: How should we aggregate into a
    group-level judgment the opinions of a panel of experts?

Overview

– We will cover a *minute* portion of the subject, focusing largely on
  the nature, value and extent of knowledge
– It is a concept central to our everyday lives ('know' is the 8th most
  frequently used verb in English; see `http://goo.gl/P6c3EX`) and
  fundamental in understanding other key notions (to remember,
  to see,…)
– First 5 lectures:
  1 Course introduction
  2 The nature of knowledge: The Gettier Problem
  3 The nature of knowledge: More on the Gettier Problem
  4 The value of knowledge
  5 Rational belief and practical interests

Overview (ctd.)

– Following 5 lectures:
  6 The limits of knowledge: Agrippa's Trilemma
  7 The limits of knowledge: the argument from ignorance and
    invariantism
  8 The limits of knowledge: the argument from ignorance and
    contextualism
  9 The limits of knowledge: the argument from genealogy
  10 How to think about knowledge: From the armchair to the lab

VARIETIES OF KNOWLEDGE

Different modes of knowledge?

- We'll focus on a particular type of knowledge ascription: ascriptions of 'knowledge-that' ('propositional knowledge')
- Example:

  'Ali knows that he won't make it on time.'

- But knowledge ascriptions also come in other formats:

  'Isaac knows how to make a pavlova.'

  'I know who Superman is.'

  'Maarten knows why zebras have stripes.'

  'Toby knows where Peckham is.'

  'Kani knows _ Faisal well.'

- Is our focus too narrow?

Intellectualism

- Proposal: all these ascriptions boil down to ascriptions of k.-that
- For instance:

  'I know that Superman is Clark Kent.'

  'Maarten knows that zebras have stripes to deter parasitic flies.'

  'Toby knows that Peckham is in South London.'

  'Kani knows that Faisal lives in Kennington, gets cranky when he hasn't exercised, likes his KFC,…'

- Similarly:

  'Isaac knows that, to make pavlova, he has to whisk egg whites in a bowl until soft peaks form, then gradually add sugar, ….'

- I should note that this last one is actually quite controversial…

Objection 1: Ryle's regress

- Ryle (1949) has influentially claimed that intellectualism leads to an implausible regress
- Assumption: intellectualism is committed to an 'instruction manual' understanding of intelligent action, namely

  Carrying out action X involves looking up a set of mentally represented instructions and acting in accordance with them

Objection 1: Ryle's regress

- Given this, knowing how to X plausibly requires knowing how to act in accordance with the relevant instructions
- But this 2nd know how will require further instructions and further know-how, etc.

- This regress is implausible

Objection 2: verbalisation

- Another complaint:

    Intellectualism commits us to the claim that people are able to correctly verbally describe the way in which they carry out tasks that they know how to perform.

- But people often cannot provide any such descriptions and to the extent that they can, often provide inaccurate descriptions

Know-how as an ability

- The distinction between k-that and k-how is now deeply entrenched (not just in philosophy: declarative vs procedural knowledge in cog. sci.)
- But if knowledge-how doesn't amount to knowledge-that, what does it amount to?
- Ryle's suggestion: one knows how to X ⇔ one has the ability to X
- This has some prima facie plausibility:

    If I know how to ride a bike, then surely I have the ability to do so, and conversely

Know-how as an ability (ctd.)

- Objection (⇒):

    A pianist who loses his arms still knows how to play the piano, although doesn't have the ability to

- Objection (⇐):

    A novice golfer who, by fluke, managed to land a hole in one had the ability to do so, but didn't know how to do it

- Perhaps one knows how to X ⇔ one would have the ability to X under some relevant range of circumstances

    - In the case of the pianist, these involve her having arms
    - In the case of the novice golfer, they involve different configurations of the golf course

Intellectualism strikes back

- Against Ryle's regress:

    Sure, the Instruction Manual view of intelligent action seems implausible, but why think that intellectualism commits one to it?

- Against the objection from verbalisation:

    Why assume that all knowledge-that is verbalisable?

- Against the ability account:

    What range of circumstances counts as 'relevant'? Until this is specified, the proposal is untestable.

The analysis of knowledge

Philosophical analysis

- In the next couple of sessions: the 'semantic/ontological' question of the analysis of 'knowledge'
- An analysis is a 'biconditional' statement, of the form 'X if and only if Y'
- Note: 'if and only if' often abbreviated as 'iff' or '$\Leftrightarrow$'
- The analysandum, X: the target of the analysis, i.e. the state of affairs or sentence that we want to analyse
- The analysans, Y: the proposed equivalent formulation of the analysandum in terms of more fundamental features of the world/concepts
- Example: 'Someone is a bachelor iff he is an unmarried man'

Philosophical analysis (ctd)

- A successful analysis
  - improves linguistic practise (avoiding misapplications of terms and hence miscommunication)
  - improves reasoning (enabling us to draw further inferences from what we know)

Analyses: objections and rejoinders

- Two types of objection to a proposed analysis:
    - Failure of necessity ($\Rightarrow$): the analysans is too strong; there are cases in which X but not Y
    - Failure of sufficiency ($\Leftarrow$): the analysans is too weak; there are cases in which Y but not X
- These are supported by counterexamples: hypothetical cases in which it seems that X but not Y, or conversely
- In response, one can either
  - (a) amend the analysis
  - (b) try to argue that the objector's intuitions about the cases are mistaken
  - (c) argue that the analysandum is ambiguous

Analyses: objections and rejoinders (ctd)

– Regarding (b), the thought is that, intuitions provide only *prima facie* evidence
– This evidence can be overturned if
    – we can argue that intuitions are unreliable in this instance (e.g. because the case is too convoluted, the intuitions can be explained away or intuitions diverge)
    – we can point to the fact that no other competing analysis does a better good a job of capturing intuitions overall, without sacrificing simplicity (analogy: curve fitting)
– Typical pattern: proposal > counterex. > tweak > counterex.…
– Unfortunately, the end result can look pretty convoluted!
– The analysis of knowledge provides a fairly striking case in point

The belief and truth conditions

– So: What does it take for a person S to know that P?
– Two baseline requirements:

    Truth: It is the case that P

    Belief: S believes that P

– Regarding Belief, one might indeed say:

    'I don't believe that Paris is the capital of France: I know it is.'

– But what one really means by this is:

    'I don't *just* believe that Paris is the capital of France: I know it is.'

The missing ingredient?

– Not all true beliefs amount to knowledge:

    Microbes: Say that I irrationally become convinced that, if I don't wear gloves when handling things, I will get ill. Say that I forget my gloves at home, go about my business at work and happen to fall ill. I (truly) believed all day that I would fall ill, but didn't know that I would.

– Plausibly, we need

    Justification: S is 'epistemically' justified in believing that P

– What does it mean to be epistemically justified (henceforth 'justified') in believing? Roughly:

    to have formed one's belief that P in a reasonable, responsible way wrt the goal of believing truths rather than falsehoods (e.g. to have inferred P from assumptions whose truth would render P sufficiently probable)

The missing ingredient? (ctd)

– Note: I spoke of *epistemic* justification in contrast with a notion of purely purely pragmatic justification
– A belief is claimed to be pragmatically justified in cases in which one would have reasons to hold it are divorced from the aims of believing truths rather than falsehoods (e.g. psychological wellbeing)
– The claim that Justification is *all* we need in addition to the previous two conditions = the 'JTB' (or 'tripartite') analysis of knowledge

The Gettier problem

- Not all true justified beliefs amount to knowledge:

  FORD (Gettier 1963): Smith tells you he has just bought a Ford. He shows you the receipt, takes you for a drive, etc.: you justifiedly form the belief that he owns a Ford. From this you legitimately infer that either Smith owns a Ford or Brown is in Boston. However, Smith has lied to you: the car is in fact his brother's. As it also happens, Brown has just taken her boyfriend to Boston for the weekend. You hold a true, justified belief which doesn't qualify as knowledge: the belief that either Smith owns a Ford or Brown is in Boston.

The Gettier problem (ctd)

- Although it was popularised by Gettier, this type of case wasn't new:

  CLOCK (Russell 1912): You glance at your usually reliable Swiss Cuckoo clock. It reads 12 o'clock. You legitimately form the belief that it is indeed 12 o'clock. And it is in fact 12 o'clock. However, unbeknownst to you, the clock stopped yesterday at 12. You have a justified true belief that falls short of knowledge.

(Note: Russell actually simply uses this as an example to show that knowledge isn't mere true belief)

The Gettier problem (ctd)

- Here is even one due to the Buddhist thinker Dharmottara, writing in the 8thC:

  MIRAGE: We are in the desert seeking water. We think we can see water some distance ahead. Although our perception was in fact caused by a mirage, we find water when we finally arrive at our destination.

(Again, it would appear that this case wasn't introduced to argue against a JTB account of knowledge)

- As we shall see, these kinds of scenarios spawned an *enormous* and complicated literature…

Next week

- Topic: 'The nature of knowledge: the Gettier problem'
- Required reading:
  - Pritchard, D. *WTK*, Ch. 3.
- Recommended reading:
  - Feldman, R. 2003: *Epistemology*. Pearson. Ch 3.
  - Gettier, E. L. 1963: Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?. *Analysis* 23(6), pp. 121-3.
  - Hetherington, S. 2005: Gettier Problems. In F. Fieser & B. Dowden (eds.), *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Sections 1–7, 9 & 10.

References

- Gettier, E. L. 1963: Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?. *Analysis* 23(6), pp. 121-3.
- Russell, B. 1912. *Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ryle, G. 2009. *The Concept of Mind, 60*th *Anniversary Edition*. London: Routledge. Originally published in 1946 by Hutchinson.