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ON ANALYSING KNOWLEDGE

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Since Gettier¹ showed that knowledge cannot be analysed as true justified belief, many repairs of this analysis have been proposed. In this work it has almost universally been assumed that the requirement of truth is part of the analysis of knowledge. I believe this assumption is misguided. Of course, I do not mean that one can know what is not true. If John knows that p , then p . It is the *independent* requirement of truth that is objectionable. Whether or not John knows that p depends, I believe, on nothing other than his experiences, dispositions, mental acts, and so forth, that is, on nothing other than facts about John.² But whether or not p is true is not, in general, a fact about John.

Suppose there are two people, a and b , who have had, so far as their experiences are concerned, identical life histories, and that there are two propositions, p_a and p_b , believed by a and b respectively, and identically related to them. It cannot be the case, I believe, that p_a is true and a knows that p_a , while b does not know but merely believes p_b because p_b is false. Putting this point another way, there cannot be two possible worlds in which John's experiences, mental acts, disposition, and so forth are exactly alike and which differ in that in one p is true and John knows that p while in the other p is false and John merely believes that p . The difference between knowing and not knowing that p cannot be just the truth or falsity of p .

I cannot prove this to someone who does not share my intuitions, but I will try to make its denial implausible in terms of an example. And I will point out some of the undesirable consequences of denying it by making the requirement of truth an independent part of the analysis of knowledge. Finally, I will attempt to allay some of the misgivings philosophers may feel at the consequences of rejecting this requirement.

Suppose a famous detective is called upon to investigate a case of embezzling, and that after a lengthy and painstaking investigation he has

exactly the same evidence that Black is not the embezzler and that White is not the embezzler. Suppose that Black is in fact the guilty party, and that White is perfectly innocent. Now, given the assumption that his evidence is exactly the same in both cases, it seems to me that *no matter how good that evidence is*, he does not know that White is innocent. He claims to know that Black is innocent on exactly the same grounds, and we cannot accept that claim. If we were to tell the detective that one of the two was guilty, he would no doubt stop believing both that White was innocent and that Black was innocent. But I think that *he* would also agree that he had never known that either was innocent. By filling in details suitably, we will be able to construct a similar example for any analysis of knowledge that makes truth an independent condition. If one is unwilling to say that the detective knows White is innocent in the situation described, he must reject all such analyses.

If one insists that the detective does know that White is innocent, knowledge becomes much less useful than we are inclined to think. Acting on one's knowledge will not lead one astray, but neither will acting on one's true beliefs. And for the same reason; it will not count as knowledge or true belief unless it is true. But it will not be possible for a person to tell what part of his apparent knowledge is knowledge. Consider our poor detective. After he is told that one of the two is guilty, we still must say that a short time ago he knew one of two propositions, but he is not now and never has been in a position to say which. This, I believe, is too much to swallow. At least, it is clear that this is what must be swallowed if truth is an independent requirement.

But now, if the detective does not know that White is innocent in this situation, it cannot be just because of Black's skill at covering his tracks. We do not want to say that the detective does not know that White is innocent, but that he would have known if Black had clumsily given away his guilt (assuming this would not count as more evidence for White's innocence). Knowledge does not disappear just because of the embarrassing parallel.

Having gone this far, I think it is clear, first, that if the detective does not now know that White is innocent, he would not have known even if Black had never existed. Whether or not he knows that *p* certainly does not depend on anything other than *p* and his evidence for *p*. And second, if he does not have knowledge in this situation, he would not have know-

ledge in any other situation in which his evidence was equally good. But we can allow the evidence to be as good as we like (as long as it does not imply what he is said to know) without altering the situation. Our famous detective knows far less than he is given credit for.

If we take the first step of admitting that the detective does not know that White is innocent, we cannot halt this journey to skepticism, for each subsequent step depends on nothing more than the assumption that if two cases are alike with respect to both the subject and the object, then either both are knowledge or both are not. In the case of Black and White, we assumed that the situations were alike with respect to the subject but not the object. Thus, if we do not allow the requirement of truth to be an independent part of the analysis of knowledge we are led to skepticism. But if we do allow it, we are forced to allow, counter-intuitively, that a person can have the same evidence for two propositions, but know only one of them, thereby not being in a position to determine which he knows.

There is another route to skepticism. What one knows is true. Thus, if truth is not an independent part of the analysis of knowledge, it must be implied by the rest of the analysis. If one's knowledge depends only on his experiences, then the analysis of knowledge must be something like: John knows that p if and only if he believes that p and his experiences, mental states, dispositions, and so forth could not be as they are without p being true. There are at least two ways in which this is inadequate. First, if 'could' is taken to represent logical possibility, we will know all the necessary truths that we believe. Second, Gettier type examples can easily be constructed using false memory impressions.³ Thus, a person can have true beliefs which could not be false, given his experiences, but which he now believes for the wrong reason. Thus, we need something more like: John knows that p if and only if John believes that p and John's present mental state guarantees him that p . This is vague, of course, and in particular in need of an account of what it would be for a mental state to guarantee a person in that state that p . But it is not my purpose to attempt an analysis of knowledge, but merely to indicate the kind of analysis required once we abandon truth as an independent requirement.

I believe many philosophers have felt that this kind of analysis could not be correct. Whatever the correct account of the crucial phrase, it will seldom, if ever, be true that one's present mental state guarantees him of the truth of anything. But we claim to know many things, and further-

more, we ought to make these claims. It would, for example, be very misleading to deny knowledge in many situations. But it is the ordinary concept of knowledge that is involved in these claims, and it is this concept that our analysis should aim to capture, not some philosophers' invention.

But these misgivings are based on a misconception, which can be brought out by considering spatial terms like 'flat' and 'straight'. These terms have recently been discussed by Peter Unger⁴ in a paper in which he points out their significance for our understanding of skepticism. I will just point out certain features of the use of these terms that are relevant to the considerations of the preceding paragraph. These terms stand for absolutes in the sense that something is flat, for example, only if it is perfectly flat. There are, in fact, no flat physical objects. But we frequently say of a physical object that it is flat. And there are many situations in which it would be misleading or worse to deny that something was flat. Thus, from the fact that we ought to call something flat in certain circumstances, it does not follow that it is flat. Likewise, it does not follow from the fact that we sometimes ought to say that we know things that we do know them.

Whether or not we ought to call an object flat depends not only on the physical characteristics of the object, but also on the circumstances, and in particular, on assumed goals and interests. We might call a certain table flat if we were looking for a place for our picnic, but not if we wanted to mount precision instruments. And you might call a field flat if you wanted to plant corn which you would not call flat if you had in mind playing baseball. Flatness is, in effect, an ideal. In practice, we call things flat if they approach that ideal. How closely they must approach the ideal depends, at least in part, on what uses we have in mind for them. The important point is that what we ought to say varies while the things we talk about remain the same. This is a sure sign that what we ought to say is determined in these instances by something other than truth conditions. Note that if we could infer that the table is flat from the fact that we ought to call it flat, we could also infer that the very same table is not flat from the fact that, the circumstances but not the table being altered, we ought to say that it is not flat.

I believe the same phenomenon emerges with 'knows'. On a camping trip we might say that John knows that a certain lake is three miles up the valley, but we might not say that he knew if his condition were the same and we were due at the lake in an hour for secret peace talks. And

I believe that if Black were not there to perplex matters it would be right to say that the detective knows that White is innocent. But given the equal evidence of Black's innocence, we ought not to say that he knows. It is not implausible to say that knowledge is an ideal – being in a mental state that guarantees the truth of its object – that is seldom realized, but that we ought to say that people have knowledge when their mental state approaches that ideal in various ways depending on the context. It must be admitted, however, that it is more difficult to see what the relationship is between the context and the propriety of knowledge claims. Nor is the ideal obviously imaginable, as it is with spatial concepts.

The important thing shown by the analogy with spatial terms is that nothing is necessarily wrong with an analysis of a concept that makes most of what we say, and ought to say, using that concept false. The analysis is not the philosophical invention of a new concept. It is an analysis of our ordinary concept, which we make use of in ways that are more complicated than we had imagined. The analogy also shows that there is nothing more surprising or philosophically objectionable about the skepticism to which we have been led than there is about the fact that there are no flat physical objects. Perhaps this means that justified belief or something like it is the more interesting concept for epistemology after all. The really significant skepticism (such as Hume's) holds that (rationally) justified belief is impossible, and that is a different matter entirely.

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NOTES

¹ Edmund Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', *Analysis* 23 (1963), 121–123.

² If this is correct, then no doubt so is a stronger condition to the effect that whether or not John knows that *p* depends only on those of his experiences that are relevant to *p*, and in fact only on those that John is in a position to realize are relevant.

³ Suppose Jones believes Brown was at a certain party because of his memory impression of seeing Brown there conversing with Green. If Green was not at the party, and has never met Brown, but Jones spent most of the evening in a now forgotten conversation with Brown, then Jones' experiences could not be as they are (have been) without Brown being at the party. But Jones does not know that Brown was at the party.

⁴ Peter Unger, 'A Defense of Skepticism', *Philosophical Review* 80 (1971), 198–219. I am not, however, convinced that 'certain' in 'John is certain that *p*' is, in Unger's terminology, an absolute term, like 'flat'. More likely, I believe, the ideal nature of knowledge is due to the requirement of (completely) *justified* certainty. Cf. William W. Rozeboom, 'Why I Know So Much More Than You Do', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1967), 281–291.