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GOLDMAN ON KNOWLEDGE AS TRUE BELIEF

ABSTRACT. Alvin Goldman contends that, in addition to the familiar sense or use of the term "knowledge" according to which knowledge is at least true justified belief, there is a weaker yet strict sense or use of the term "knowledge" according to which knowledge amounts to nothing more than information-possession or mere true belief. In this paper, I argue that Goldman has failed to show that there is such a weaker sense, and that, even if he had shown this, he has not shown that this putative weaker sense is a strict one by his own criterion for strictness.

Alvin Goldman (2002a, p. 183) distinguishes the following four putative uses or senses of "knowledge":

(1) Knowledge = belief.
(2) Knowledge = institutionalized belief.
(3) Knowledge = true belief.
(4) Knowledge = justified true belief (plus).[1]

(1) and (2) he characterizes as "loose" uses or senses of "knowledge"; by "loose", he means "an extended, technical use that departs from the standard, colloquial senses" (p. 183). He claims that (1) and (2) are "employed by sociologists of knowledge and a variety of other researchers (including cognitive scientists, for example) who do not aim to conform to standard usage" (p. 183). By contrast, he characterizes (3) and (4) as "strict" uses or senses of "knowledge"; by "strict" he means a use or sense "that conforms to some standard, ordinary sense of the term in colloquial English (as judged by what epistemologists who attend to ordinary usage have identified as such)" (p. 183). He claims that (3) and (4) are typically advanced by one or more philosophers.

Goldman acknowledges that mainstream philosophical epistemologists almost all concur that (i) belief or opinion alone does not suffice for knowledge, (ii) truth is required for knowledge, and (iii) true belief does not qualify for knowledge "unless it is justified, warranted, or acquired in some suitable fashion (e.g., by reliable methods)" (p. 183).

Although he does not dispute the existence of the sense of "knowledge" that corresponds, at least roughly, to (4), he claims there is also, a "second, weaker sense" of "knowledge" captured by (3).[2] In this putatively weaker sense, to know that *p* is simply to possess the information that *p*, "where 'information' entails truth but 'possession' merely entails belief, not necessarily justified or warranted belief" (2002b, p. 185).

In this paper, I shall argue that Goldman fails to provide a sound case for what I shall call, for ease of reference, "Goldman's Thesis." This thesis consists of the conjunction of the following two claims: (i) there is a weaker sense or use of "knowledge" according to which knowledge is nothing more than true belief, and (ii) this weaker sense or use of "knowledge" counts as strict according to Goldman's criterion of strictness, namely, that it "conforms to some standard, ordinary sense of the term in colloquial English (as judged by what epistemologists who attend to ordinary usage have identified as such)." One of the lessons I shall draw from this discussion is that, if Goldman's Thesis were correct, it would follow that *any* true belief whatsoever, no matter how accidentally or irrationally or unjustifiably formed, would count as an instance of a kind of knowledge. This consequence, I shall argue, flies in the face of an epistemological consensus that I support.

1.

Before considering the grounds that Goldman adduces for his thesis, it is worth noting that, although he is right that information entails truth, he treads on much more dubious ground when supposing that possessing the information that *p* entails believing that *p*.

That possessing the information that *p* does not entail believing that *p* can be shown as follows. Believing that *p* involves having some (relatively strong degree of) conviction that *p*.[3] However, it is possible to possess the information that *p* without this conviction. For instance, one can consider that *p* only if one possesses or has the information that *p*, but considering that *p* does not entail the degree of conviction required by believing that *p*. Or take an example involving a machine: a network server may possess the information that *p* – even making it available on the world wide web – without believing that *p*.

Accordingly, Goldman errs in supposing that possessing the information that *p* entails believing that *p*. Setting this preliminary

point aside, I shall consider in the next two sections the two principal grounds he adduces for claim (i) of his thesis.

2.

One principal ground for claim (i) consists of an example of John Hawthorne's (2000).[4] Goldman puts the example as follows:

> Suppose a teacher *S* wonders which of her students know that Vienna is the capital of Austria. She would surely count a pupil as knowing this fact if the pupil believes (and is disposed to answer) that Vienna is the capital of Austria, even if the student's belief is based on very poor evidence. The teacher would classify the pupil as one of those who "know" without inquiring into the basis of his/her belief, and even in the face of evidence that it was a poor basis. (2002b, pp. 185–186).

Goldman takes this to show that there is an information-possession sense of "knowledge" (or concept of knowledge) where it amounts to nothing more than true belief. But does this example show what Goldman thinks it does?

The Hawthorne/Goldman example is quite brief, so let me flesh it out by considering some scenarios.

Scenario (A): *S* asks her students: "What is the capital of Austria?", and student Billy confidently answers: "Vienna." Under this scenario, suppose that *S* does not inquire into the evidential basis of Billy's belief. In this case, let us also suppose that *S* would indeed probably count Billy as knowing (and as having the true belief) that Vienna is the capital of Austria. But as Grice (1989) points out, assertions have conversational implicatures. When one asserts an answer, the conversational implicature of the assertion is that one has justification (reason, evidence, or ground) for thinking that the assertion is true; else, one should not have ventured the assertion. Thus, when someone gives us a correct answer, we normally impute to him or her not only a true belief, but also justification for that belief. Moreover, imputing belief to someone by itself normally involves imputing (even if implicitly) to that person some reason or other for believing it.[5] That is, we normally assume that a person does not hold a belief for *no* reason at all, but rather that the person in question holds the belief because she has reason for believing it, even if we might not be aware of what that reason is. Hence, that a teacher, without inquiring into the evidential basis of her student's belief that *p*, would count that student as knowing that *p* because the student correctly believes (and is disposed to answer) that *p* does not show

that she imputes to her student knowledge in *nothing more* than Goldman's putatively weak sense of mere true belief. More than likely, she is imputing to her student, even if implicitly, justification for that belief as well.

A defender of Goldman's Thesis might challenge my invocation of the conversational implicature of assertion by claiming that the teacher-student situation is not normal. As an anonymous reviewer of this journal puts it:

> The student may have reason to venture the answer even if he lacks a justification and is not quite sure of the answer. What is special of the classroom situation is that a (correct) confident answer is likely to be rewarded. This may make a student venture to produce a confident answer even if he or she is not quite sure of its truth (and hence lacks a complete justification), in the hope that the answer will be judged correct and rewarded by the teacher. There is no implicature of the kind in question in the classroom scenario.[6]

Though I find it implausible that "[t]here is no implicature of the kind in question in the classroom scenario" as the reviewer claims, let us suppose for the sake of argument that this claim were correct. If so, then the Hawthorne/Goldman example as interpreted by the reviewer would prove problematic on a different ground. For if it is in the student's interest to guess or "produce a confident answer even if he or she is not quite sure of its truth (and hence lacks a complete justification), in the hope that the answer will be judged correct and rewarded by the teacher," then we would not expect the student to only give answers that he actually believes. In this case, therefore, the Hawthorne/Goldman example would not provide an example of knowledge *even in Goldman's putative weaker sense*, because it would not even provide an example of belief (let alone true belief). This is because belief requires some relatively strong degree of conviction: guesses, even lucky ones, are not beliefs.

In scenario (A), *S* does not inquire into the evidential basis of her student's belief. But it is also worth considering two scenarios in which *S* does so.

Scenario (B): *S* asks her students: "What is the capital of Austria?", and Billy confidently answers: "Vienna." Under this scenario, suppose that *S* asks Billy why he believes this, and he answers that he just read the answer in the super-reliable geography textbook in front of him. *S* would indeed probably count Billy as knowing (and as having the true belief) that Vienna is the capital of Austria, but in this case it seems that she would not impute to him knowledge in Goldman's putatively weak sense of *mere* true belief, but in the familiar sense of knowledge as true belief with justification.

Scenario (C): *S* asks her students: "What is the capital of Austria?", and Billy confidently answers: "Vienna." But under this scenario, suppose that *S* also asks Billy: "What is the capital of France?"; "What is the capital of Japan?"; "What is the capital of Nigeria?"; and "What is the capital of New Zealand?"; to which four questions Billy answers "Pienna", "Sienna"; "Bienna"; and "Lienna" respectively. Suppose, upon inquiring, that *S* finds out that gullible Billy believes that Vienna is the capital of Austria because he believes whatever his sidekick Sid whispers to him, and Sid, playing a joke, was just randomly telling him made-up names, one of which by sheer coincidence happened to be right. In this case, it seems highly implausible that *S*, aware here of the provenance of Billy's belief, would credit him with knowing – *in a non-loose sense* – that Vienna is the capital of Austria *even if* she might credit him with having the true belief that Vienna is the capital of Austria.[7]

In sum, in Scenario (A) where *S* does not inquire into the basis of her student's belief, *S*'s crediting her student with having knowledge that *p* – in light of her student's having the true belief that *p* – plausibly involves considerations neglected by Goldman; namely, the conversational implicature of assertion and the fact that when we attribute belief to someone, we normally (even if implicitly) impute to that person reason for that belief. Moreover, if we suppose that the student is not asserting an answer with the conversational implicature that this entails, but rather is merely guessing, then the Hawthorne/Goldman example does not give us a case of belief, let alone true belief. In Scenario (B), where *S* finds a strong evidential basis for her student's belief, it seems that *S* would indeed impute knowledge to her student, but not just in Goldman's putatively weak sense of mere true belief. In Scenario (C), where *S* finds a poor evidential basis for her student's belief, it seems implausible that *S* would impute knowledge – *in a non-loose sense* – to her student *even if* she attributes true belief to him. Hence, it turns out that, when fleshed out and critically scrutinized, the Hawthorne/Goldman example fails to support claim (i) of Goldman's thesis.

3.

Goldman (1999) adduces another ground for claim (i) of his thesis. He suggests that there is a sense in which "*X* knows that *p*" is synonymous with "*X* is aware that *p*" (or "*X* is apprised of *p*"), a sense that he claims "ignores justification" (p. 164); for instance, if, given

that *p* is true, we wonder whether Jane is aware that *p*, all that remains to be resolved is whether she believes that *p*, with justification or evidence being irrelevant. Similarly, he claims that there is a sense of "know" such that, if it is given that *p* is true, and we wonder whether Jane knows that *p*, all that remains to be resolved is whether she believes that *p*, with justification or evidence being irrelevant once again.

Another example he adduces is that of the sentence "You don't want to know what happened while you were gone" which, according to Goldman seems to mean: You don't want to have the truth about what happened in your belief corpus. He adds: "It does not seem to require the translation: You don't want to have a *justified* belief in the truth about what happened. So I believe there is an ordinary sense of 'know' in which it means 'truly believe'" (p. 165).

Goldman is right that there is a sense of "*X* knows that *p*" that seems to be synonymous with "*X* is aware that *p*"; where he goes astray, however, is in thinking that the latter is equivalent to "*X* truly believes that *p*". Being aware that *p* implies having knowledge that *p* through alertness or in interpreting what one sees, hears, feels, and the like; it thus implies some kind of cognitive contact (typically perceptual and causal) with the state of affairs of which one is aware.

Consider this example. Suppose that a brain-experiment is performed on *X* in which, by accident, *X* is induced via electrochemical stimulation to believe that there is presently an odd number of people in the hospital; and suppose, by sheer coincidence, that there presently is. Here we have a case where *X* believes that *p* and where *p* happens to be true, and yet it seems highly counter-intuitive to say that *X* is aware that (or knows that) *p*.[8] What appears to be lacking is cognitive contact on *X*'s part with the state of affairs in question. Justification in the externalist sense of having a belief produced "in the right way" seems far from irrelevant.[9]

What about the example of the sentence "You don't want to know what happened while you were gone" which Goldman takes to be equivalent to "You don't want to have the truth about what happened" and not to "You don't want to have a *justified* belief in the truth about what happened?" The problem here for Goldman is that "You don't want to have a *belief* in the truth about what happened" sounds about as infelicitous a translation as "You don't want to have a *justified* belief in the truth about what happened". The expression "having the truth" in this context seems to be equivalent to knowing or being aware of the truth, and it begs the question for Goldman to suppose that the latter amounts to merely believing the truth.

4.

Given the considerations above, I submit that Goldman has failed to present a sound case for claim (i) of his thesis that there exists a weaker use or sense of "knowledge" (or concept of knowledge) where it amounts to mere true belief. But let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Goldman had established claim (i). Since defending Goldman's thesis requires defending not only claim (i) but claim (ii) as well, let us consider his case for claim (ii), namely, that this weaker putative sense or use of "knowledge" as true belief counts as strict according to Goldman's criterion of strictness.

It should be noted here that Goldman's criterion rules out as *strict* any use or sense of "knowledge" that does not conform to standard usage in colloquial English "(as judged by what epistemologists who attend to ordinary usage have identified as such)." Thus, just because someone uses "knowledge" to mean true belief, it does not follow *ipso facto* that this counts as a strict use.

What's curious here is that Goldman presents *no* independent case for claim (ii) of his thesis; he seems to assume that a defense of claim (i) is itself a defense of claim (ii). But this does not follow. The Hawthorne/Goldman example and the example of "*X* knows that *p*" (where this expression allegedly amounts to no more than mere true belief that *p*) do not by themselves establish that there is a strict use of "knowledge" that conforms to standard usage in colloquial English "(as judged by what epistemologists who attend to ordinary usage have identified as such)." We should remember that even Goldman himself acknowledges that mainstream epistemologists almost all concur that true belief does not qualify for knowledge "unless it is justified, warranted, or acquired in some suitable fashion (e.g., by reliable methods)" (2002a, p. 183).

In fact, the epistemological literature bears ample witness to an overwhelming consensus[10] on what we may call the "Insufficiency Thesis," namely, the thesis that true belief does not suffice for knowledge in the *standard* sense of "knowledge." The Insufficiency Thesis comes in at least three forms. The most popular form takes knowledge to be true justified belief with a codicil for Gettier, though disagreement continues over what this codicil should be. A second form takes knowledge to be true belief which satisfies some additional requirement other than justification.[11] A third form takes knowledge to be analyzable in terms of belief.[12]

The main motivation for the Insufficiency Thesis is that to count *any* true belief whatsoever as an instance of knowledge, no matter how accidentally or irrationally or unjustifiably formed, does not seem to conform to the standard sense of "knowledge" and seems quite implausible. And this at least partly explains why epistemologists have labored so hard to find what in addition to true belief is required for knowledge in this standard sense. Yet, if Goldman were correct about his putative weaker sense of "knowledge", it would follow that *any* true belief whatsoever, no matter how accidentally or irrationally or unjustifiably formed, would count as an instance of a kind of knowledge. This, I submit, flies in the face of the epistemological consensus, and thus seriously undermines claim (ii) of Goldman's thesis.

5.

In light of the discussion above, I conclude that Goldman has failed to establish his conjunctive thesis that (i) there is a weaker sense or use of "knowledge" according to which knowledge is nothing more than true belief, and (ii) this weaker sense or use of "knowledge" counts as a strict use. If there is a sense or use of "knowledge" according to which knowledge amounts to mere true belief, it would seem that this use counts at best as a loose (or technical or extended) use of the term.[13]

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NOTES

[1] The "plus" is for a codicil that accounts for Gettier cases.

[2] Sartwell (1991, 1992) defends the thesis that knowledge is mere true belief. See Le Morvan (2002) for a criticism of his case. Whereas Goldman distinguishes between

what he calls Strong Knowledge (which is supposed to be true belief plus justification) and Weak Knowledge (which is mere true belief), Sartwell takes *all* knowledge to be nothing more than true belief.

[3] In this connection, see the discussion in Sartwell (1991) concerning why guesses do not count as beliefs.

[4] This paper was subsequently published as Hawthorne (2002). The example that Goldman gives using a teacher is actually a variation on Hawthorne's example that claims that we would count people as knowing that Vienna is the capital of Austria if they possessed the information that Vienna is the capital of Austria, "no matter where they got the information from" (Hawthorne 2002, p. 253). Cf. Goldman (2002a, p. 165). Interestingly, Hawthorne himself is much more cautious than Goldman about whether "know" has a weaker, "mere information-possession or true belief" sense. Hawthorne, for instance, does not commit himself to holding that "know" has such a weaker sense, allowing it to be one of a number of options concerning what semantic treatment to give "know" in such contexts.

[5] Unless, of course, we suppose the person in question is irrational or arational.

[6] Quoted from the anonymous reviewer's comments. Fallis (2004) anticipated this point.

[7] Consider this variation on scenario (C): *S* asks her students: "What is the capital of Austria?", and Billy confidently answers: "Vienna." But suppose that *S* also asks Billy: "What is the capital of France?"; "What is the capital of Japan?"; "What is the capital of Nigeria?"; and "What is the capital of New Zealand?"; to which four questions Billy answers "Vienna"; "Vienna"; "Vienna"; and "Vienna" respectively. Suppose, upon inquiring, that *S* finds out that Billy believes that Vienna is the capital of Austria because he believes that Vienna is the capital of any and every country. The latter belief has led Billy to the true belief that Vienna is the capital of Austria, but it seems very implausible that *S* would credit Billy with knowing – *again in a non-stipulative sense* – that Vienna is the capital of Austria *even if* she might credit him with having the true belief that Vienna is the capital of Austria.

[8] An anonymous reviewer of this journal pointed out that I referred to "Sartwell's 'thick' concept of belief earlier in the text" and that I "should note at this point, for the sake of consistency, that Sartwell's conception is incompatible with this being a case of belief. On his account, 'beliefs' that are isolated, like the belief about the number of people in the hospital, are not really beliefs at all: beliefs come in groups." The point that beliefs come in groups is a good one, and the example can be modified to incorporate this point in the following way. Suppose that, when the brain-experiment is performed on *X*, by accident, *X* is induced via electrochemical stimulation to believe a group of beliefs about the room, the hospital, etc., and one of these beliefs is that there is presently an odd number of people in the hospital.

[9] Given his stature as one of the preeminent defenders of the Causal Theory of Knowledge and of Justification Externalism, one would expect Goldman to be sympathetic to such a point.

[10] By "consensus" I mean preponderant opinion, not unanimity.

[11] Some epistemologists deny that justification is a necessary condition for knowledge. See, for instance, Dretske (1981), Alston (1989), Plantinga (1993), and Carrier (1994). None of these epistemologists, however, thinks that true belief suffices for knowledge and so each proposes a third condition to the analysis of knowledge.

[12] See the impressive defense of this view in Williamson (2000).

[13] An anonymous reviewer of this journal contested this point (namely, that if there is a sense or use of "knowledge" according to which knowledge amounts to mere true belief, it would seem that this use counts at best as a loose use of the term) with the following example. As the reviewer puts it: "Consider a case of one person's, A's, actions leading to the death of another person, B. Suppose we want to ascertain whether A is to be held responsible for B's death. This raises the question of whether A knew that his actions would have such dire consequence. Surely, this translates into 'Were A confident at the time that his actions would have these consequences?' Whether or not A had reason for being confident is not at stake here. When it comes to assigning responsibility, only belief/certainty/confidence matters, and yet we do use the term 'know' colloquially. I see no reason for regarding this as a loose sense of 'know'."

The reviewer takes it as obvious that A's knowing that his actions would have such dire consequences amounts to nothing more than A's belief/certainty/confidence. Let me make the following two points in response. First, if it were the case that *only* belief/certainty/confidence mattered here, then this would not support Goldman's thesis which entails that there is a sense or use of "knowledge" according to which it amounts to *true* belief. In fact, the reviewer would not be supporting Goldman's Thesis with this example, but rather the thesis that there is a sense or use of "knowledge" according to which it amounts to belief, a sense or use that Goldman *himself* characterizes as a loose use of the term. I side with Goldman on this point. Second, though I agree that we use "know" colloquially when assigning responsibility to A, I see no good reason to adopt the position that the reviewer seems to find obvious, namely that A's reasons are not at stake here and all that matters is A's belief/certainty/confidence. In fact, I think there is good reason to adopt the opposite of the reviewer's position, *for we assign responsibility to only rational agents, and rational agents presumably act on beliefs for which they have reason or justification.*

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