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HOW TO FORMULATE ARGUMENTS FROM EASY KNOWLEDGE, AND MAYBE HOW TO RESIST THEM

Alexander Jackson

ABSTRACT

Arguments from “easy knowledge” are meant to refute a class of epistemological views, including foundationalism about perceptual knowledge. I present arguments from easy knowledge in their strongest form, and explain why other formulations in the literature are inferior. I criticize two features of Stewart Cohen’s presentation (2002, 2005), namely his focus on knowing that one’s faculties are reliable, and his use of a Williamson-style closure principle. Rather, the issue around easy knowledge must be understood using a notion of epistemic priority. Roger White’s presentation (2006) is contaminated by the so-called lottery puzzle, which is best kept separate. Distinguishing basic from non-basic visual contents limits the force of the examples discussed by Cohen, White, and Crispin Wright (2007). Finally I present a new strategy for resisting even the best-formulated arguments from easy knowledge.

1. ARGUMENTS FROM EASY KNOWLEDGE—AS I SEE THEM

Arguments From Easy Knowledge are meant to refute a class of epistemological views, including foundationalism about perceptual knowledge. Stewart Cohen (2002, 2005), Crispin Wright (2002, pp. 342–5; 2007, pp. 43–5) and Roger White (2006) present versions of the argument; James Pryor (2004, 2012, 2013) is among those trying to rebut it. This paper locates the best way to formulate arguments from easy knowledge, clearing up some mistakes in the literature. (I address only what Cohen calls the argument from “easy knowledge by deduction”, not his “bootstrapping” argument.¹) Finally I present a new strategy for resisting even the best-formulated arguments from easy knowledge.

This section presents arguments from easy knowledge as I see them. To my mind, these arguments must be framed using a notion of epistemic priority. Let's have some cases of so-called "easy knowledge" on the table, starting with Cohen's original example.

(RED LIGHTS) Stu goes to buy his son a red table. Stu sees a table in the shop, and comes to know by perception that it is red. He addresses the possibility that he is subject to a certain kind of error by reasoning: "The table is red; so it is not the case that the table is white with red lights shining on it."

(ALIENS) Janet lives in New York, and knows that she will be in Long Island tomorrow—she teaches a course there twice a week. She addresses an outlandish worry that she won't make it tomorrow. She reasons: "I'll teach in Long Island tomorrow; so I won't be permanently abducted by purple aliens tonight."

(FALLACY) Sheila knows that if someone plays in the NFL then they are rich, and she knows that Mike is not rich. She competently deduces that Mike does not play in the NFL. She addresses the possibility that she inferred fallaciously as follows: "Mike does not play in the NFL; so it is not the case that I inferred fallaciously from true premises and he does play in the NFL."

In these cases, the subject infers that she is not mistaken, allegedly meeting the following three conditions. Firstly, the subject knows her premise is true. Secondly, the premise obviously entails the conclusion. But thirdly, the reasoning is illegitimate; it is rationally impermissible. The subject's belief that she is not going wrong is labeled "easy knowledge" ironically. What's important is that *the reasoning* is rationally defective; it strikes me as optional to say the reasoning fails to produce knowledge or justified belief. For example, I find it clear that Janet's reasoning in ALIENS is illegitimate, but less obvious that she does not come to know that she won't be permanently abducted by purple aliens tonight.² Some philosophers try to explain away the intuition that the reasoning in question is illegitimate (including Pryor 2004, 2012, and Davies 2004); I am not convinced.³

I am going to talk about settling questions in particular ways.⁴ For example, visual perception, memory, and deductive inference are ways to settle questions. Settling that *p* is the same thing as judging that *p*, but I want to avoid the oddity of referring to “ways of judging”. Ways of settling a question can be ways to come to know, but need not be, as when forms a false or unjustified judgment. One can settle that *p* without first raising the question of whether *p*. Now let’s define:

A “*skeptical alternative*” *sk* to *S*’s settling that *p* in way *W* is a proposition according to which it appears to *S* that *p* in the way characteristic of *W*, yet *p* is false.

Arguments from easy knowledge take the following form, starting with a claim about an example like those set out above.

SCHEMA FOR ARGUMENTS FROM EASY KNOWLEDGE

- (1) In example *E*,
 - (a) *S* settles that *p* in way *W*;
 - (b) *S* thereby knows that *p*;
 - (c) *sk* is a skeptical alternative to *S*’s settling that *p* in way *W*, and hence *p* entails $\sim sk$; but:
 - (d) It is illegitimate for *S* to infer from *p* that $\sim sk$. (premise)
- (2) In example *E*, *S* must settle that $\sim sk$ *epistemically prior* to settling that *p* in way *W*. (inferred from (1), by IBE)
- (3) One must always settle that a given skeptical alternative does not obtain *epistemically prior* to settling a question in way *W*. (inferred from (2))

(2) is meant to be the best explanation for why (1) is true. In *ALIENS*, Janet’s inference is allegedly illegitimate because she must settle that she won’t be permanently abducted by purple aliens tonight *epistemically prior* to settling (in the normal way) that she’ll teach in Long Island tomorrow. It seems little more than common sense to say that in a crucial sense, Janet has to settle *first* that she won’t be permanently abducted by purple

aliens tonight. Similarly, Stu's reasoning in RED LIGHTS is allegedly defective because Stu must settle that his conclusion is true epistemically prior to settling that his premise is true.

Let me spend five paragraphs explaining how I understand epistemic priority. In my view, we are talking about a distinctive kind of epistemic rationality constraint, an example of which is that Janet's reasoning is rationally forbidden. More carefully: some occurrent mental states and processes count as "settling that p epistemically prior to settling that q", some as failing to do so, and some as neither (such as when one settles neither p nor q). That categorization makes a mental state or process rationally permissible or not, in a particular respect. Take, for example, a case of "easy knowledge". Reasoning from p to ~sk counts as: failing to settle that ~sk epistemically prior to settling that p; doing so is allegedly rationally impermissible. This prohibition is not a matter of the connection between premise and conclusion being too weak—one should believe that if p then ~sk. So epistemic priority requirements are distinct from rational requirements that one's premises sufficiently strongly support one's conclusions.

When "easy knowledge" is forbidden, it is also forbidden to: judge that p and suspend judgment on whether sk. The forbidden combination counts as: failing to settle that ~sk epistemically prior to settling that p.⁵ By contrast, it is not forbidden to: judge that p while ignoring the question of whether sk. For example, there is nothing wrong with Janet judging that she will teach tomorrow while ignoring the question of whether she will be abducted by purple aliens tonight. So that does *not* count as: failing to settle that she won't be permanently abducted by purple aliens tonight epistemically prior to settling that she will teach on tomorrow. That is, Janet must settle that she won't be permanently abducted by aliens tonight *epistemically* prior to settling that she will teach on tomorrow; but that does not entail that Janet must actually consider the outlandish worry in order to rationally judge that she will teach in Long Island tomorrow. The epistemic priority requirement only kicks in if Janet actually considers the skeptical alternative. This is a just a terminological stipulation about how to use the expression "S must settle that ~sk epistemically prior to settling that p". We could instead always say, "If S considers whether sk, then S must settle..." But these sentences are complicated enough as it is.⁶

Careful statements about epistemic priority specify the ways in which the questions are settled. Suppose Tanya has two ways to settle that Albany is the capital of New York State: she remembers it is, and she also reads it in an atlas (cf. Cohen 1999, pp. 74–6). Tanya must settle that the sentence in the atlas is not misprint epistemically prior to settling that Albany is the capital *on the basis of the report in the atlas*. But Tanya must settle that Albany is the capital epistemically prior to settling that the sentence in the atlas is not misprint *by inference from the fact that the sentence is true*.

On my approach, talk of “epistemic priority” is just a way of talking about a cluster of rational prohibitions on mental states and processes. This conception stays as close as possible to the apparent phenomena, taking on the least amount of theoretical baggage. For example, the intuition is that Stu’s reasoning in RED LIGHTS is rationally defective; saying it violates an epistemic priority requirement simply places the relevant prohibition in a cluster of prohibitions (e.g., against Stu’s judging that the table is red while suspending judgment on whether it is white and illuminated by red lights). By contrast, the characterizations of epistemic priority in the literature take on controversial theoretical commitments. For example, Crispin Wright (2002, 2004, 2007) says that in the cases at issue, the subject’s “warrant” for the premise “fails to transmit” to the conclusion. “Warrants” are a generalization from propositional justifications. Many theorists will find it foreign to take warrants to be the fundamental epistemic notion, in terms of which other epistemic notions are to be understood. We should not assume that epistemic priority constraints can only be understood by taking warrants as the basic unit of epistemological theorizing. I’d go further: I find it natural to take the impermissibility of certain inferences to be the basic phenomena, not something involving “warrants”.

James Pryor (2004) also characterizes epistemic priority in terms of propositional justification. Moreover, he gives a definition of epistemic priority that should be controversial. He defines “your justification to believe p needs to be antecedent to your justification to believe q” to mean that: “the conditions that make you have that ... justification [to believe that q] include your having this justification to believe p.” (Pryor 2004, p. 354, sentence-letters changed). I see this supposed definition as proposing a controversial *explanation* for the irrationality of certain inferences, whereas I think we should start by simply labeling the relevant kind of prohibition. It isn’t obvious that the

metaphysical order of explanation for the positive epistemic status of certain beliefs should give rise to rational prohibitions of the kind we are considering. (Let me illustrate why Pryor's definition is controversial. This will involve jumping ahead of ourselves; I hope you will forgive my doing so within the safety of some parentheses. In § 6 I suggest that one can settle that \sim sk *at the same point epistemically speaking* as one settles that p. In such a case, one does not settle one question epistemically prior to the other. Pryor's definition then rules out the view that: one is justified in believing that \sim sk partly in virtue of being justified in believing that p. But that view strikes me as a worthy of consideration.)

Let's move on to the next step in an argument from easy knowledge. The inference from (2) to (3) takes the example at hand to be representative of a way to settle questions. For example, if RED LIGHTS is representative of visual perception, then one must always settle that one isn't misled epistemically prior to settling a question by means of visual perception. In general, an argument from easy knowledge is meant to establish "conservatism" about a way to settle questions:

Conservatism about a way W of settling questions says that (for all subjects S, propositions p, and skeptical alternatives sk to settling that p in way W): S must settle that \sim sk epistemically prior to settling that p in way W.⁷

Liberalism about a way W of settling questions says that: conservatism about W is false.

If conservatism about W is true, then that way to settle questions is not foundational. For foundationalism about W says that sometimes there is nothing one needs to settle epistemically prior to settling a question in way W; conservatism says that one must always settle that skeptical alternatives don't obtain epistemically prior. Conservatism rules out other views too. Deductive inference is not a foundational way to settle questions, as any premises must be established first, but liberalism about it seems plausible. One kind of skeptical alternative to a deduced conclusion is that the premises are true but the inference is fallacious. (Another kind is that the conclusion is deduced

from a false premise.) So liberalism about deduction is true if sometimes, one need not settle that one isn't inferring fallaciously epistemically prior to settling a question by deduction. An argument from easy knowledge using FALLACY purports to refute that liberal view.

It is natural to formulate arguments from easy knowledge in terms of epistemic priority requirements. §§ 2–3 criticize Cohen's attempts to do otherwise. § 4 warns against working with an example that's infected with the so-called lottery puzzle, and applies the lesson to White's discussion (2006). § 5 focuses on visual perception, examining the consequences for easy knowledge of distinguishing basic from non-basic visual contents. § 6 points to a possible objection to even the best-formulated arguments from easy knowledge.

2. COHEN'S FORMULATION: KNOWING THAT ONE'S FACULTIES ARE RELIABLE

This section criticizes a first aspect of Cohen's formulation of arguments from easy knowledge. Cohen (2002, 2005) says an argument from easy knowledge concludes that KR is true of the relevant "knowledge source".

(KR) A potential knowledge source K can yield knowledge for S [at time t], only if [at t] S knows K is reliable.

He thinks the truth of KR explains why "easy knowledge" inferences are illegitimate. But there are cases in which it can't.

Suppose Jonny is at an open-air market. He knows that he is outside in good natural light. He knows that his color vision is a reliable source, and that his putative deductive reasoning is too. So he satisfies the requirements KR places on those two sources. He sees a red table, and he comes to know that the table is red by looking, while satisfying KR. But now Jonny considers whether the table is white and illuminated by red lights. He could have come to know that the table is not white and illuminated by red lights on the basis of his knowledge that the table is outside and illuminated by natural light;⁸ but he doesn't. Instead, Jonny reasons that since the table is red, it is not white and illuminated by red lights.

Jonny's reasoning is repugnant, and KR can't explain why: Jonny meets the conditions KR places on forming knowledge by visual perception and deductive inference. By contrast, conservatism can explain why Jonny's reasoning is repugnant. Conservatism about color judgments says that Jonny must settle that the table is not white and illuminated by red lights epistemically prior to settling that the table is red. Jonny's reasoning violates this epistemic priority constraint, and so is irrational, says the conservative.

Jonny's reasoning is a paradigmatic case of repugnant "easy knowledge". Conservatism can explain why it is repugnant, while KR cannot. Therefore conservatism is the better general explanation for why "easy knowledge" inferences from perceptual knowledge are illegitimate. Arguments from easy knowledge involve an inference to the best such explanation (the step from (1) to (2) in the schema I gave). So conservatism is a more plausible conclusion than KR to draw from this argument from easy knowledge. Examples like Jonny can be constructed for all ways of knowing, I suggest, and so conservatism is always the more plausible conclusion for arguments from easy knowledge.

3. COHEN'S FORMULATION: USING A WILLIAMSON-STYLE CLOSURE PRINCIPLE

Now let's look at the role of various "closure" principles in arguments from easy knowledge. Cohen (2002, p. 312, but not 2005) endorses CK, and I approve.

(CK) If S knows that P, and S knows that P entails Q, then S is in a position to know that Q.

It is helpful to see that both liberals and conservatives should accept CK.⁹ If Stu knows his premise, then he is in a position to know his conclusion (\sim sk)—the question is *how* he can know it. Conservatives say that Stu must settle first that \sim sk, and liberals disagree.

Cohen (2005 but not 2002) endorses DC and uses it to formulate arguments from easy knowledge.

(DC) If S knows that P, and S competently deduces Q from P, then S knows that Q.

Principles like DC have been popularized by Timothy Williamson (2000, p. 117). John Hawthorne has defended the following variant (Hawthorne 2004, p. 34).

(DC*) If S knows that P, competently deduces that Q, and thereby comes to believe that Q, while retaining knowledge of P throughout, then S thereby comes to know that Q.

Let me first explain why it is unhelpful to formulate arguments from easy knowledge using DC*, before turning to DC. The moral will be that there is no alternative to framing the issue in terms of epistemic priority requirements.

The problem with appealing to DC* is that RED LIGHTS and ALIENS are a prima facie counterexamples. Stu comes to believe that the table is not white and illuminated by red lights, by competent deduction from his knowledge that the table is red. On the face of it, DC* says that Stu thereby comes to know that the table is not white and illuminated by red lights. But (assuming Cohen's gloss on the intuition) he can't come to know in that way. Similarly, DC* seems to say that Janet comes to know that she won't be permanently abducted by purple aliens tonight, by means of her repugnant inference.

I don't insist here that DC* is false. One might defend DC* by saying the antecedent of DC* is not satisfied if S must settle that Q epistemically prior to settling that P. One might say that reasoning that violates the required epistemic priority of settling that Q cannot be "competent" deduction. Or one might say that engaging in reasoning that violates an epistemic priority requirement destroys knowledge of the premise, P. Thus the cases of Stu and Janet won't be counterexamples to DC* properly interpreted. However, such interpretations of DC* will only imply that Stu's reasoning produces knowledge *under the assumption* that his reasoning does not violate a requirement of epistemic priority. If DC* is true (as we are interpreting it) and Stu's reasoning does not produce knowledge, then his reasoning violates the requirement to settle first that $\sim sk$. That is, arguments from easy knowledge that invoke a defensible

interpretation of DC* establish a conclusion about the proper epistemic order of settling questions, namely conservatism. It is easier to make this clear by leaving DC* out of it.

Cohen says, “The problem for [theories that deny KR] is that given [DC], the theory has to allow that [Stu’s] reasoning is acceptable” (2005, p. 418). Cohen rests his explanation of the role of DC there. He is naturally interpreted as making the argument discussed above, which invokes DC*. But let’s consider an alternative that really appeals to DC. Grant that Stu knows that the table is red, but cannot come to know that the table is not white and illuminated by red lights by competently deducing it. DC implies that when he has deduced it, Stu knows that \sim sk (the table is not white and illuminated by red lights). Cohen’s intuition is that Stu does not come to know that \sim sk *by means of the inference*; DC is compatible with this. Given DC, Stu knows that \sim sk, but not by deducing it from his perceptual knowledge. Stu must know it in some other way—he must already have known it. This conclusion has a similar flavor to conservatism. Let me explain why I don’t think this is a helpful way to understand arguments from easy knowledge.

Distinguish occurrent from dispositional knowledge (i.e., a good occurrent belief from a good dispositional one). If DC implies that Stu has *occurrent* knowledge that \sim sk, then it implies that Stu forms the relevant occurrent belief in two ways—one of which is the way he comes to know, posited by DC, and the other being the illegitimate “easy knowledge” inference. But we can stipulate that Stu does not come to occurrently believe that \sim sk in any way other than the repugnant inference. So if DC is interpreted as concerning occurrent knowing, then RED LIGHTS is a counter-example (given Cohen’s intuition that the repugnant inference does not produce knowledge).

So let’s consider DC as a principle about dispositional knowing. That is, suppose DC implies that Stu has dispositional knowledge that \sim sk, and that DC thus interpreted is true. This way of framing arguments from easy knowledge leaves it mysterious why Stu’s inference is illegitimate. The argument takes as a premise that Stu’s inference is bad, but it makes no attempt to diagnose why. Why on earth does DC* fail in this case? The existence of another way of knowing that \sim sk does not explain why Stu cannot also know it by deducing it from his perceptual knowledge. By contrast, conservatism diagnoses

why Stu's reasoning is illegitimate: it violates an epistemic priority constraint. We've found no alternative to taking the truth of conservatism to be the central issue.

(For what it's worth, I think we should accept that RED LIGHTS and ALIENS are counter-examples to DC*. Moreover, DC* conflates issues that must be distinguished: the compelling principle CK, and controversial claims about the permissible order of settling questions. Wright 2002 draws this standard distinction.)

4. DEFEATERS AND THE LOTTERY PUZZLE

This section restricts the kind of example that can be used in an argument from easy knowledge. Liberalism about W says that *sometimes*, one need not settle that \sim sk epistemically prior to settling that p in way W. Liberalism allows that sometimes, one *does* need to settle that \sim sk epistemically prior to settling that p in way W. The liberal about a way of settling questions can say that when there is reason to worry that one is deceived, one's prima facie justification is *defeated* (e.g., Pryor 2000, p. 534). The liberal can say that in such cases, one must settle that the relevant skeptical alternative does not obtain epistemically prior to settling questions in the relevant way.

For example, spell out RED LIGHTS so that we want to say that Stu can't know the table is red just by looking from 10 yards, because for all he knows, the lighting is deceptive. Stu is in a basement store, and has already noted the use of a blue lightbulb in another corner. The liberal can accommodate this case, saying that Stu has beliefs that defeat his prima facie perceptual justification. Those defeating beliefs affect the epistemic order in which Stu is to settle questions. In this situation, Stu must settle that the table isn't deceptively illuminated epistemically prior to settling by perception that the table is red. That's an obligation he cannot discharge.

Now suppose an employee tells Stu that the table is illuminated by a daylight-mimicking bulb. Stu can now know that the table is red. It is still true that he must settle that the table isn't deceptively illuminated epistemically prior to settling that it is red. But the employee's testimony allows him to meet that requirement. So Stu can know that the table is red, but it is impermissible for him to deduce that the table is not white and illuminated by red lights.

The moral is that whenever it is plausible that there is a defeater for the subject's prima facie justification, the liberal can agree with the conservative that "easy knowledge" violates an epistemic priority requirement. So an argument from easy knowledge must employ a case in which the subject has no defeating beliefs. RED LIGHTS should not stipulate that Stu views a table in a basement shop, as the liberal can claim that Stu has reason to worry about deceptive lighting. Rather, RED LIGHTS should be a case in which Stu shops for a red table at an outdoor market in broad daylight. Stu's reasoning remains repugnant.

We need to beware here of the effects of the so-called "lottery puzzle"¹⁰ (Vogel 1990, Hawthorne 2004). The lottery puzzle arises for most ways of settling questions (Hawthorne 2004, pp. 1–5). Considering the right alternative often causes us to reverse an initial attribution of knowledge. In ALIENS, for example, we initially agree that Janet knows she will teach in Long Island tomorrow. But considering whether Janet's old car will break down, or whether there will be grid-lock on the Long Island Expressway, typically causes us to change our minds—Janet doesn't know she will teach in Long Island tomorrow.

There's no puzzle yet: it just seems that Janet doesn't know she will teach in Long Island tomorrow. The puzzle arises when we generalize from the example at hand, realizing how susceptible we are to these shifts in our verdicts. Do people know very little, and we realize this when we consider a range of skeptical alternatives? (Call this the skeptical solution.) Do people know a lot, and we are wrong to reverse our knowledge ascriptions? (Call this the dogmatic solution.) Is there a third diagnosis, according to which the initial attribution and the subsequent reversal are both "correct"? Contextualism, subject-sensitive invariantism and truth-relativism are theories of the third, "shifty" kind.¹¹ (I hope the reader will forgive formulations that blur the distinctions between the three kinds of shifty theory.)

A lottery puzzle can arise for ways of knowing for which liberalism is true. When liberals change their minds about whether the subject knows, they can say they changed their minds about whether the subject's prima facie justification is defeated. For example, a liberal about color vision can say, "I was being sloppy earlier when I said that someone in a basement shop can know a table is red just by glancing from 10 yards: they know

that artificial lighting is sometimes deceptive, which defeats their perceptual prima facie justification.” Moreover, liberals about a way to settle questions can endorse a shifty response to the relevant instances of the lottery puzzle. Liberals who favor a shifty solution to the lottery puzzle will say that there has been a shift in the “correct” verdict as to whether the subject’s prima facie justification is defeated, that goes hand in hand with the shift in the “correct” verdict as to whether the subject knows.¹²

The lottery puzzle is a problem for everyone. So it wouldn’t be fair to press the lottery puzzle about perception, say, and then complain that liberalism about perception has to choose between implausible dogmatism and skepticism. Maybe a shifty solution allows us to escape that dilemma; or maybe dogmatism or skepticism seem less implausible when you realize the full scope of the lottery puzzle. Let me explain why I think Roger White (2006, pp. 536–7) makes this unfair objection to liberalism.

White attacks liberalism about visual knowledge that something is a hand. He asks us to suppose that Harry knows that 98% of the population has hands, 1% has prostheses instead, and 1% has mere stumps. Harry looks at the end of a stranger’s coat from 20 yards away. He can’t reason, “She has hands, so she does not have mere prostheses.” White alleges that liberalism must endorse this repugnant reasoning. That is not so. The liberal can say that Harry doesn’t know just by looking that the stranger has hands. That’s because Harry’s prima facie perceptual justification to believe that the things are hands is defeated by his statistical knowledge about prostheses. As a result, all Harry learns by looking is that the things look like hands, just as White asserts.¹³

White responds to this maneuver as follows (2006, pp. 536–7).

If this is the appropriate response to the experience when we happen to know these statistics [about the frequency of prostheses and stumps], I can’t see why it should be any different in an ordinary case. Our judgments should be governed largely by our best estimate of these statistics.

That is: if the liberal retreats to a skeptical treatment of Harry, saying that his prima facie justification is defeated, then the liberal must give the same skeptical treatment of every putative case of perceptual justification.

But this is simply to press the lottery puzzle in the case of perceptual knowledge. Considering the statistics about prostheses shifts our intuitions and makes us deny that Harry knows he is looking at real hands. White presses us to draw a general moral, which implies that there is very little perceptual knowledge. Philosophers who favor a shifty solution to the lottery puzzle respond that the propriety of ascribing perceptual knowledge shifts according to whether the statistics about mistakes are being considered. Hence it is often proper to attribute lots of perceptual knowledge to people. Liberals about perception can endorse a shifty solution to the lottery puzzle. They will match the shifts in proper knowledge attributions with shifts in the propriety of claiming that a subject's prima facie justification is undefeated. If a shifty solution to the lottery puzzle manages in general to steer between dogmatism and skepticism, then it does so here for the liberal too. And if a skeptical solution is correct, then the liberal can endorse that instead (assuming there are plenty of defeating beliefs to go round). Only the dogmatic solution to the lottery puzzle creates a problem for the liberal. For I suggested that the liberal should say that Harry doesn't know that the stranger has hands, and the dogmatic solution says he does. So the dogmatic solution allows White to formulate his argument from easy knowledge against perceptual liberalism. But, I've argued, shifty or skeptical solutions to the lottery puzzle do not.

Conservatives can formulate arguments that take as a premise the dogmatic solution to the lottery puzzle. They can then claim—counter-intuitively—that Harry does know the stranger has hands, and press the question of why Harry can't then deduce that they are not prostheses. But such arguments would be theoretically controversial, rather than intuitively compelling. Much better, I think, for arguments from easy knowledge to consider cases where the subject reasons from a premise they intuitively know. Are there any such cases? Are there cases of putative easy knowledge in which we still think the subject knows her premise (and lacks defeating beliefs), even when the case has been fully described?¹⁴ Yes—ALIENS is one such case. After she considers the possibility of abduction tonight by purple aliens, we still say that Janet knows she will teach in Long Island tomorrow. RED LIGHTS is another suitable case, once we specify that Stu looks at a red table outside in broad daylight. Even once we and Stu consider the possibility that the table is white and illuminated by red lights, we are happy to say that Stu knows the table

is red; but his inference is illegitimate. Again, I am usually happy to say that I know that Paris is the capital of France, and to affirm I am not misremembering that; but it still seems wrong to reason from the former to the latter. So there are examples that are not *automatically* afflicted by the lottery puzzle, and can be used to frame arguments from easy knowledge.

5. BASIC AND NON-BASIC VISUAL CONTENTS

The literature on easy knowledge tends to focus on arguments for conservatism about visual perception. As I will explain, it matters whether we should think of visual perception as a single way to settle questions, or several.

Plausibly, vision consciously presents the contours and colors of facing surfaces differently from those features of non-facing surfaces, and the classification of objects as zebras or hands, say. Call the former “basic” visual contents, and the others “non-basic” visual contents.¹⁵ Susanna Siegel (2010) is amongst those who reject this distinction. If her Rich Content Thesis is true, says Siegel, “then in whatever way we can be in contact with a thing’s shape and color, we can likewise be in contact with other properties of the things we see, such as a thing’s being a hand (part of an animate body), its weighing down a hammock (a causal property), or its walking down the street carrying a dog.” (Siegel 2010, pp. 7–9)¹⁶ But consider how I represent the volume of the sofa I am looking at from across the room. Surely the way I am in contact with the facing surfaces of the sofa differs from the way I am in contact with its rear. I can see the front of the sofa, and can’t see the back of it. Two different ways of representing surfaces are involved in representing the sofa’s occupation of space.

Rather than getting bogged down in this dispute, let’s simply suppose for the sake of argument that we should distinguish basic from non-basic visual contents. Moreover, let’s suppose that the non-basic contents of a percept are “based on” its basic contents (e.g., Pryor 2000, pp. 538–9). I suggest that this basing is not a matter of how basic and non-basic contents are computed. It is not relevant whether there is top-down processing, in which a favored non-basic content has a causal impact on the favored basic content. What matters is that the two kinds of content are represented in different ways when they hit consciousness, allowing for different metacognitive responses to them. For instance,

one can wonder why one thinks someone is lying (is it their voice or their eyes?), in a way that one can't wonder why one thinks a certain surface looks brown—it is not recognized as such on the basis of any other information. It may be challenging to spell out how non-basic contents are based on basic contents in a way that is compatible with current cognitive science, but let's just suppose that this can be done. Then one can be liberal or conservative about basic vision, and about non-basic vision. Officially, Pryor (2000, pp. 538–9) only defends liberalism about basic vision. What is shown by an example of easy knowledge depends on whether the premise is known by basic or non-basic vision, and on the nature of the skeptical alternative.

Suppose someone reasons, “Those things are hands, so they are not prostheses that are indistinguishable from hands at this distance.” The premise is a non-basic visual content, and the conclusion is the negation of a worry about the basing of that non-basic content on some unchallenged basic content. The repugnance of such reasoning may be a problem for liberalism about non-basic vision; but it is clearly not a problem for liberalism about basic vision. Even after eliminating interference from the lottery puzzle, White's example does not touch liberalism about basic vision.

Does the distinction between basic and non-basic visual contents make a difference to RED LIGHTS? That depends on whether classifying something as red is a non-basic visual content. Let's consider an account according to which it is non-basic. I am not saying such an account is correct. I want to argue that *if* such an account is correct, *then* RED LIGHTS does not impugn liberalism about basic vision.

The account we'll consider distinguishes “objective” and “phenomenal” color as follows (cf. Pollock and Oved 2005, esp. 329–331). When one judges a painted wall to be of a uniform color, there is a sense in which it looks lighter nearer the window. One represents the wall as taking different values of “phenomenal color”. On that basis, one classifies the wall as being of a certain uniform “objective” color.¹⁷ In RED LIGHTS, Stu uses a belief about the table's objective color to rule out a worry about the basing of that belief on the table's phenomenal color. So if Stu's reasoning is repugnant, it looks like he must settle that the lighting is not deceptive epistemically prior to settling the table's objective color on the basis of its phenomenal color. That is, an argument from easy knowledge that uses RED LIGHTS challenges liberalism about non-basic vision, not

liberalism about basic vision. (Or so it seems, assuming that redness is a non-basic visual content.)

Distinguishing basic from non-basic visual contents also allows a more exciting epistemological point to be made. Crispin Wright allows that whether something is a zebra, a hand, or is red, are plausibly non-basic visual contents (2007, pp. 45–7). He assumes the point of such a view is to combine liberalism about basic contents and conservatism about non-basic contents. Such a combination is committed to Wright’s project of showing that conservatism does not entail skepticism. So Wright concludes that distinguishing basic from non-basic visual contents does not make a big difference to the epistemology of perception (2007, p. 47). I deny that the point of distinguishing basic from non-basic visual contents is to combine liberalism about the former with conservatism about the latter. Rather, the distinction allows a more plausible liberal treatment of both kinds of content—assuming the kind of liberalism introduced in the next section, where I’ll explain the idea.

6. A WAY FOR LIBERALISM TO RESIST ARGUMENTS FROM EASY KNOWLEDGE?

Some arguments from easy knowledge avoid the pitfalls described in §§ 4–5. For example, suppose Vicky looks at a table and reasons, “There is a thusly-shaped surface over there; therefore it is not that case that: I am hallucinating and there is no surface there.” (Ignore lines of thought leading to a lottery puzzle....) It is plausible that Vicky knows her premise, and yet her reasoning is illegitimate. An argument from easy knowledge concludes that conservatism is true of basic visual perception. But as I explain in this final section, this conclusion does not follow.

I suggest that the liberal about basic perceptual knowledge can agree that Vicky’s reasoning is illegitimate. Rejecting easy knowledge means that one cannot settle that \sim sk *epistemically posterior* to settling that p. The argument from easy knowledge infers that one must settle that \sim sk *epistemically prior* to settling that p. That does not follow: maybe one must settle that p by perception, and that \sim sk, *at the same point epistemically speaking*. Then easy knowledge is always illegitimate, but liberalism about perception is true.

There is some plausibility to the proposal. Suppose Vicky's sensible twin Wanda has a particular perceptual belief, and addresses the worry that it results from a hallucination. She is in a dilemma, to which she either responds skeptically (suspending judgment on both questions), or anti-skeptically (forming two judgments). It sounds right that Wanda settles *in one go* that there is a thusly-shaped surface over there, and that no hallucination deceives her. Moreover, the idea of settling two questions at the same point has wider application: plausibly, one must settle that *p*, and that *one knows that p*, at the same point epistemically speaking.¹⁸

Three observations. First, the proposal says that Vicky *must* settle that *p* and that \sim sk at the same point epistemically speaking. That does not entail there's anything wrong with settling that *p* while not considering whether sk. We already saw this point for epistemic priority in § 1 (Janet can rationally judge that she will be in Long Island tomorrow while ignoring the question of alien abduction). In particular, children who lack the concept of hallucination are not thereby "failing" to settle that they aren't hallucinating at the same point epistemically speaking as they settle matters by perception. They aren't thinking in one of the ways the proposal rationally forbids.

Second, the proposal does not resemble traditional coherentism. Coherentism says that two beliefs can inferentially support each other. By contrast, when one settles two matters at the same point epistemically speaking, neither belief inferentially supports the other. For example, one cannot reason in either direction between the claims that *p*, and that *one knows that p*.¹⁹

Third, the strategy need not be equally plausible for all ways of settling questions. I am drawn to liberalism about propositional memory, for example, but conservatism about Janet's knowledge of the future in ALIENS. So I'm inclined to think that it is impermissible (or psychologically impossible) for Janet to settle that she won't be permanently abducted by purple aliens tonight, and that she will teach in Long Island tomorrow, at the same point epistemically speaking.

What must liberals about W do to make good on the proposed response to arguments from easy knowledge? I say that liberals must give a psychological account of how people settle that \sim sk in the relevant cases. Doing so must plausibly count as settling that *p* and that \sim sk at the same point epistemically speaking. I have not given the needed

psychological account here. (Jackson 2015 makes a proposal.) Without a detailed and plausible account, conservatives can sensibly deny that there is such a way of settling that one is not mistaken. If the argument of this paper is correct, this psychological question should be at the heart of future debates between liberals and conservatives. For, I suggest, it determines the fate of the only plausible way for liberals to resist arguments from easy knowledge.

I close by returning to the issue raised at the end of § 5. I've suggested that one can settle that p and that $\sim sk$ at the same point epistemically speaking. I'll now explain why this makes more plausible the combination of liberalism about both basic and non-basic vision. My working example of basic visual content is that there's a stripey thing there; the non-basic visual content based on it is that the thing is a zebra. My liberal about basic vision says that one must settle a basic visual matter (there's a stripey thing) at the same point as one rejects a worry about it (I'm not hallucinating). My liberal about basic and non-basic vision can say that one must settle that one is not hallucinating epistemically prior to settling that those things are zebras. For liberalism about non-basic vision is true if there are skeptical alternatives to the basing of the non-basic content on unchallenged basic content which need not be ruled out epistemically prior. For example, maybe one must settle that one has not confused the appearance of zebras with that of giraffes *at the same point epistemically speaking* as one settles that those things are zebras. Then liberalism about non-basic vision would be true, even if one must settle that one is not hallucinating epistemically prior to settling that those things are zebras.

So on my proposal, the liberal about both basic and non-basic vision can reject the reasoning, "That's a zebra, so I am not merely hallucinating the presence of a stripey thing in a region of empty space." By contrast, if the liberal about basic and non-basic vision allows easy knowledge from basic visual contents, then she is committed to endorsing the just-mentioned "easy knowledge". For if one is to settle that one is not hallucinating epistemically posterior to settling the basic perceptual matter, then I see no complaint against a two-step transition that settles one is not hallucinating on the basis of a non-basic visual content.²⁰ But this example of "easy knowledge" is particularly hard to stomach. So liberalism about basic and non-basic vision is a lot more plausible if it endorses the suggestion of this section.

NOTES

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¹ I am happy to bite the supposed bullet and endorse “bootstrapping” (Cohen 2002, 2005). I am not so insouciant about the kind of “easy knowledge” discussed in this paper.

² I go against Tucker’s conception of the issue (2010, p. 505) here. Another example: suppose someone reasons, “I have hands, therefore I am not a massively deceived Brain In a Vat (BIV).” The reasoning seems bad to me, but I’m not sure that the reasoner wouldn’t thereby come to know that she is not a massively deceived BIV.

³ Pryor thinks Stu’s reasoning in RED LIGHTS is legitimate, and tries to explain away the contrary intuition as follows (2004, 2012). He observes that if one is unreasonably suspicious that one is a deceived, or that certain epistemologies of perception are correct, then one won’t be rationally able to form perceptual knowledge, and so the easy knowledge inference won’t be available. This fails to explain why philosophers who harbor no such unreasonable suspicions (and who consider subjects who don’t either) still find easy knowledge repulsive. Davies (2004) claims that if one is trying to “settle the question” of whether one is deceived, one cannot form easy knowledge that one is not. But if one assumes that one knows one is not deceived, and wonders merely *how* one knows it, then one can form easy knowledge, according to Davies. Our examples can be re-cast in this latter form, and I still find the relevant inferences repugnant.

⁴ This is not the technical notion Martin Davies (2009 § 9) calls “settling a question”.

⁵ There is a general prohibition of coherence against: judging that p, and that p entails q, and suspending judgment on q. But when one must settle that q epistemically prior to settling that p, it is even worse to suspend judgment on q. One violates an epistemic priority requirement, as well as the more general coherence requirement. For example, it is worse than mere logical incoherence to suspend judgment on whether one will be permanently abducted by purple aliens tonight, and yet judge that one will teach tomorrow.

⁶ It is not the case that if one settles that p and that q, then one settles that p either epistemically prior or epistemically posterior to settling that q. One sometimes settles two questions *epistemically independently*, which entails that one does not settle either question prior to the other. Examples include settling by perception that one has hands, and that one has feet. § 6 introduces a further kind of case: ones in which one settles that p and that q at the same point epistemically speaking.

⁷ The terms “conservatism” and “liberalism” have been used in a variety of ways in the literature, surveyed by Neta (2010) and Tucker (2010). According to Pryor’s (2004) original definition, conservatism about perception says that for each “non-perceiving hypothesis”, one must settle that it does not obtain epistemically prior to settling questions by perception. The falsity of a non-perceiving hypothesis (e.g., that one is dreaming) need not be entailed by what’s known by perception. So if we are focused on whether a view endorses easy knowledge, it is better to define conservatism in terms of skeptical alternatives. However, I think it is incoherent not to deny *all* non-perceiving hypotheses considered when one forms perceptual beliefs; so it would be is deeper to define conservatism in those terms, as Pryor does.

⁸ This aspect of the case distinguishes my challenge from one considered by Cohen (2005, pp. 422–4). Cohen considers the objection that the truth of KR does not prevent easy knowledge, as knowing that one’s faculty of perception is generally reliable does not put one in a position to know that one is not deceived on this particular occasion. By contrast, my example stipulates that Jonny is in a position to know that he is not deceived.

⁹ Wright (2004 § II) explores restricting CK, saying that one only has “warrant to trust” that one is not a BIV, not “justification to believe” it. Wright accepts that what one is warranted in assenting to is closed under known entailment.

¹⁰ Beware of reading into this label: it is controversial whether all cases of the phenomenon can be analogized to our apparent ignorance of whether a given ticket will win the lottery.

¹¹ Contextualists include Cohen (1999), DeRose (1996), and Lewis (1996). Hawthorne (2004, chapter 4) explores subject-sensitive invariantism without definitively endorsing it. MacFarlane (2014, chapter 8) defends truth-relativism about knowledge ascriptions.

¹² If a particular version of contextualism (say) cannot extend to shifts in whether there are defeating beliefs, then so much the worse for that particular theory.

¹³ Another of White’s objections *assumes* that perceptual justification for p is always a matter of possessing the evidence that it appears to one that p. For example, Harry’s perceptual evidence is that the things look like hands. That rules out that the stranger has stumps, but should make Harry

more confident that she has prostheses (up from 1% to 1.01% confidence). So looking can't increase Harry's justification for thinking the stranger does not have prostheses. (Compare Hawthorne 2004, pp. 73–7; Cohen 2005, pp. 424–5; Wright 2007, p. 42; Silins 2008, § 3.3; Neta 2010, § 5.) This objection begs the question, it seems to me. The most obvious version of liberalism says that one's perceptual evidence sometimes includes such facts as that the things *are* hands. Pryor (2013, esp. §§ 5–6) explores this and other more *recherché* liberal responses; see also Weatherson (2007).

¹⁴ Cohen (2005, pp. 424–5) seems to overlook the existence of lottery-resistant cases of easy knowledge.

¹⁵ Pryor suggests that whether something is a hand is a basic content, but whether something is a police officer is a non-basic content (2000, pp. 538–9). I find this odd. On the view we will consider, one recognizes something as a hand on the basis of its size, shape, and color; so being a hand is a non-basic content.

¹⁶ Officially, Siegel's question is whether visual experience represents certain features (2010, p. 7). She does not consider distinguishing ways in which a percept represents.

¹⁷ This account may seem more plausible in light of the view of basing suggested in the previous endnote. One might identify the representation of phenomenal color with the phenomenology of color experience. There's no assumption here that the representation of phenomenal color is determined by local retinal stimulation, with no color constancy whatsoever. An anonymous reviewer notes that bees represent colors without representing anything like phenomenal colors. So maybe the color vision of bees differs drastically from that of humans.

¹⁸ Klein (2004) says two beliefs are “epistemically on a par” iff they are both supported by some third belief. I deny there need be such a third belief in cases of settling two questions at the same point epistemically speaking.

¹⁹ Sosa's (2009) proposal resembles coherentism more than it does my proposal. He says, “it must be recognized that...*the mutual support* [resulting from “easy knowledge” inferences] ... might add something of epistemic value” (2009, p. 242, my emphasis; see also pp. 237–241). So he seems to endorse “easy knowledge” reasoning, whereas my proposal rejects it.

²⁰ Tucker (2010, § 3.1) agrees that “inefficient” easy knowledge inferences have the same status as “efficient” ones. He thinks both are legitimate, and I think neither is.

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