

Insensitive and Unsafe Knowledge

Abstract

Sensitivity and safety are modal concepts of knowledge. A person's belief that p is sensitive if and only if in the closest possible world where p is false S does not believe that p . A person's belief that p is safe if and only if in most near-by possible worlds in which S continues to form her belief that p in the same way as in the actual world the belief continues to be true. Robert Nozick claims that sensitivity is a necessary condition for knowledge. Ernest Sosa, Timothy Williamson and Duncan Pritchard argue among others that safety is necessary for knowledge. I shall contest both views by offering counterexamples of persons, to whom it is highly plausible to ascribe knowledge although their beliefs are neither sensitive nor safe. I conclude that neither sensitivity nor safety is a necessary condition for knowledge and that insensitive and unsafe knowledge exists.

1. Introduction

Sensitivity and safety are modal concepts of knowledge. A person's belief that p is sensitive if and only if in the closest possible world where p is false S does not believe that p . A person's belief that p is safe if and only if in most near-by possible worlds in which S continues to form her belief that p in the same way as in the actual world the belief continues to be true. Robert Nozick claims that sensitivity is a necessary condition for knowledge. Ernest Sosa, Timothy Williamson and Duncan Pritchard argue among others that safety is necessary for knowledge. I shall contest both views by offering counterexamples of persons, to whom it is highly plausible to ascribe knowledge although their beliefs are neither sensitive nor safe. I conclude that neither sensitivity nor safety is a necessary condition for knowledge and that insensitive and unsafe knowledge exists.

2. Sensitivity

Nozick (1981) interprets knowledge modally. He argues that a person knows iff her belief is tracking truth in the correct way. Nozick defines knowledge in a first approximation as following:

- S knows p iff
- (1) p is true.
 - (2) S believes that p .
 - (3) If p weren't true, S wouldn't believe that p .
 - (4) If p were true, S would believe that p .¹

Premise (3) constitutes the crucial sensitivity condition for knowledge. Therefore, knowledge is *insensitive*, if it is knowledge although condition (3) is not fulfilled. Using possible world terminology, we can state that this is the case, if the following holds:

- (¬3) S knows p , but in the nearest possible world in which p isn't true S believes p .

Condition (4) of Nozick's knowledge definition is contradicted if the following holds:

¹ See Nozick (1981), 172-177.

- (-4) S knows p, but there is a wide class of near-by possible worlds in which p is true and S does not believe p.

Any knowledge that fulfils condition (-3) is an instance of *insensitive knowledge* and any knowledge that violates condition (3) or condition (4) is a counterexample against Nozick's account of knowledge as tracking the truth.

3. Safety

Ernest Sosa (1999) argues that sensitivity cannot explain simple cases of everyday knowledge which has been regarded as one of its advantages. He suggests replacing sensitivity by the alternative modal principle safety, which he defines as following:

Call a belief by S that p "safe" iff: S would believe that p only if it were so that p. (Alternatively, a belief by S that p is "safe" iff: S would not believe that p without it being the case that p; or, better, iff: as a matter of fact, though perhaps not as a matter of strict necessity, not easily would S believe that p without it being the case that p.)

Safety In order to (be said correctly to) constitute knowledge a belief must be safe (rather than sensitive).

(Sosa 1999: 142)

Safety is a modal principle. Therefore, it can be formulated by using possible world terminology. Duncan Pritchard (2007) formulates it as following:

- (SP') S's belief is safe *iff* in most near-by possible worlds in which S continues to form her belief about the target proposition in the same way as in the actual world the belief continues to be true.

(Pritchard 2007: 281)²

The starting point of Pritchard's (2005 and 2007) epistemic investigation is the common sense claim that knowledge excludes luck. Pritchard (2007) defines a true belief as non-lucky "*iff* there is *no* wide class of near-by possible worlds in which S continues to believe the target proposition, and the relevant initial conditions for the formation of that belief are the same as in the actual world, and yet the belief is false."³ This concept of non-lucky beliefs is obviously closely related to the safety principle.

John Greco (2007) argues that the safety principle cannot handle all cases of knowledge, which it has to do for capturing the essential aspect of knowledge. In order to meet this objection, Pritchard (2007) refines Sosa's account of safety as following:

- (SP'') S's belief is safe *iff* in most near-by possible worlds in which S continues to form her belief about the target proposition in the same way as in the actual world, and in all very close near-by possible worlds in which S continues to form her belief about the target proposition in the same way as in the actual world, the belief continues to be true.

(Pritchard 2007: 292)

² Pritchard (2007: 283) also considers strengthening the safety principle by demanding that the agent's belief has to be true not just in *most* of the relevant nearby possible worlds, but in *nearly all* (*if not all*) of them.

³ Pritchard (2007), 281.

The contemporary literature indicates that the safety principle can take different forms. Therefore, we have to consider various versions of *unsafe* beliefs.

A belief is *unsafe* according to Sosa's formulation of safety iff the following is true:

(\neg SP) S believes p but S would not only believe that p if it were so that p.

Contradicting Pritchard's formulation of safety, which is based on the notion of possible worlds, means to formulate an *unsafe* belief as following:

(\neg SP') S believes p but not in most near-by possible worlds in which S continues to form her belief about the target proposition in the same way as in the actual world the belief continues to be true.

A belief is *unsafe* according to Pritchard's modified formulation of safety (SP'') iff the following holds:

(\neg SP'') S believes p but not in most near-by possible worlds or not in all very close near-by possible world in which S continues to form her belief about the target proposition in the same way as in the actual world the belief continues to be true.

Williamson regards safety as an instance of reliability and assumes that safety is necessary for knowledge but he reverses the orthodox direction of explanation dominant in epistemology.⁴ In his "knowledge first" methodology, Williamson takes the simple distinction between knowledge and ignorance as a starting point from which to explain other things, not as something itself to be explained.⁵ He argues that we must use our understanding of knowledge to explain safety and not the other way round. Williamson consequently argues that we have to use our understanding of knowledge to determine whether the similarity to a case of error is great enough in a given case to exclude knowledge.⁶

In many cases, someone with no idea of what knowledge is would be unable to determine whether safety obtained. [...] One may have to decide whether safety obtains by first deciding whether knowledge obtains, rather than vice versa.
(Williamson 2009: 305)

Williamson concludes that the role of his safety account is not to deliver clear independent predictions as to the truth-values of knowledge claims in particular tricky examples.⁷

4. Insensitive and Unsafe Knowledge

Sensitivity and safety are modal knowledge accounts. In both cases the belief forming process must be connected to truth in a specific way for converting the true belief into knowledge. In this sense, each account has built a tracking condition as a necessary condition into the knowledge definition. Nozick and his followers claim that sensitivity is necessary for knowledge. Sosa, Pritchard, Williamson and others argue that safety is necessary for knowledge. I will now investigate whether it is reasonable to accept knowledge that violates each of these tracking conditions and that is, thus, *insensitive* and *unsafe*.

⁴ For his explanation of relation between knowledge and safety see Williamson (2000), 128.

⁵ Ibid, v.

⁶ See Williamson (2009), 305.

⁷ Ibid, 306.

A person who has insensitive knowledge is someone who holds a true and warrant belief that *p*, but in the closest possible world, in which *p* is false, she still believes that *p*. Such a person can be characterized as someone who is *prejudiced* concerning *p* in the sense that she would believe that *p* even if it were false.

S has knowledge that does not fulfil Nozick's condition (4) iff *S* knows *p*, but there is a wide class of near-by possible worlds, where *p* is true and *S* does not believe *p*. Such a person can be regarded as *narrow-minded* concerning *p*, since it is easily possible that *S* does not believe *p* although *p* is true.

S has knowledge that is unsafe according to the Pritchard's formulation of safety iff *S* knows *p* but not in most near-by possible worlds in which *S* continues to form her belief about the target proposition in the same way as in the actual world the belief is false. Beliefs that are unsafe according to alternative versions of safety have been defined above. Again, such persons can be characterized as prejudiced in the sense that it is easily possible that they hold a belief that *p*, although *p* is false.

None of these persons who hold insensitive or unsafe beliefs are ideal reasoners. They violate the epistemic rules to believe what is true and not to believe what is false in one way or the other. Following these epistemic rules can be regarded as possessing epistemic virtues. In this respect the question whether insensitive and/or unsafe knowledge exists can be interpreted as the puzzle whether knowledge without epistemic virtues is possible.

If insensitive and unsafe knowledge exists, then it is *non-ideal* knowledge concerning the process of belief acquisition respectively concerning the epistemic virtue of the believing person. However, we usually accept knowledge that is not ideal in other respects. We admit that justification and warrant come in degrees. We accept infallible knowledge based on justification that entails the truth of the justified belief as well as fallible knowledge that is based on justification that makes truth probable, but not certain. Furthermore, we distinguish different degrees of fallible knowledge with respect to the probability that the justified belief is true and, in this respect, *excellent fallible* knowledge from *poor fallible* knowledge. Infallible knowledge is ideal with respect to justification, but poor fallible knowledge is definitely not. Hence, we usually accept knowledge that is not ideal with respect to justification. So why shouldn't we accept knowledge that is not ideal regarding the belief forming process or regarding the epistemic virtues of the believing person as well?

The current view about knowledge can be characterized by the following two claims: First, we can have ideal and non-ideal knowledge with respect to justification. Second, we cannot have non-ideal knowledge with respect to belief acquisition. It is important to note that *excellent fallible justification* and *non-ideal belief acquisition* are compatible with each other as well as *poor fallible justification* and *ideal belief acquisition*. Those who argue that a correct belief forming process is strictly necessary for knowledge, must admit that a person fails to know that *p*, if the counterfactual conditional is false, even if the person possesses excellent fallible justification. Hence, the following claim with a counterintuitive taste can be true:

Ci1: *S* is convinced that *p* and *S* has excellent fallible justification that *p*, but *S* does not know that *p*.

The counter-intuitiveness increases, if we take into account that it can be a person's achievement that she has proven *p* to be true. In this case, the following claim can be true as well:

Ci2: *S* is convinced that *p* and *S* has excellent fallible justification that *p* and it is *S*'s achievement that she has this justification, but *S* does not know *p*.

This second claim Ci2 sounds even more counterintuitive than Ci1.

Ci1 and Ci2 are instances of *excellent justification* and *non-ideal belief acquisition*. They fail to be instances of *knowledge* according to Nozick, Sosa, Pritchard and Williamson, because justification and warrant can come in degrees in a way, that sensitivity or safety cannot.

If one accepts Ci1 and Ci2, then one defends standards of knowledge that can be regarded as very high with respect to the belief forming process. However, this position becomes even more problematic, if one also acknowledges weak standards for knowledge with respect to justification. Nozick for example argues that S knows that p iff S holds a sensitive, true belief that p and S would believe that p, if p were true. Hence, S need not possess any justification beyond this adequate belief forming process for having knowledge at all. Therefore, Nozick is committed to accept Ci1 and Ci2 on the one hand and knowledge without justification on the other hand. Authors like Williamson and maybe Sosa seem to be in a better position, since they regard safety as a necessary but not explicitly as a sufficient condition for knowledge. They have to accept Ci1 and Ci2, but they might deny knowledge that is non-ideal with respect to justification, by rejecting knowledge with non-ideal fallible justification. However, I doubt that they are willing to take this road.

5. Conclusion

Persons who hold insensitive and unsafe beliefs are rationally flawed in one way or the other. They are either prejudiced because it is easily possible that they would hold the belief even if it were false or they are narrow-minded since it is easily possible that they would not hold the belief, even if it were true. Prejudiced persons fail to possess the epistemic virtue not to believe what is false, narrow-minded persons do not possess the virtue of believing what is true. If prejudiced or narrow-minded persons can have knowledge, then it must be non-ideal. Those philosophers like Nozick who think that sensitivity is necessary for knowledge or those like Sosa, Williamson or Pritchard who argue that safety is necessary must refute such non-ideal knowledge. However, there is wide agreement that knowledge can be non-ideal and gradual with respect to justification. Hence, we accept knowledge that is non-ideal in one respect, but refute knowledge that is non-ideal in some other. Moreover, ideal and non-ideal justification can co-occur with ideal and non-ideal belief forming processes. Hence, we must accept poor fallible but sensitive/safe knowledge, but we have to refute excellent fallible but insensitive/unsafe knowledge.

I think this is a counterintuitive consequence. Sensitivity, safety and related accounts like reliable belief forming processes might be *sufficient* for knowledge and they might be necessary for particular forms of knowledge, such as perceptual knowledge, but they are not *necessary* for any kind of knowledge. Knowledge is a vague concept that involves several features such as truth, justification or adequate belief forming processes. Truth might be a necessary condition for knowledge but the way the belief is acquired is not. If one claims that sensitivity or safety is necessary for knowledge, then one is committed to a concept of knowledge that is too restrictive.

References

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