

25. Lewis 1996: Elusive Knowledge

Kevin Dorst
kevindorst@pitt.edu

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I. The Gambit

Infallibilism: Knowing p requires ruling out all possibilities in which $\neg p$.

Fallibilism seems implausible (abominable conjunctions¹).

But doesn't infallibilism lead to skepticism?

Both fallibilism and skepticism are bad! What to do?

Lewis (like Stine 1976): dodge the choice; be a contextualist about 'knowledge' so infallibilism is true in letter, but not in a way that leads to skepticism.

¹ "I know I have hands, but I can't rule out the possibility that I'm a handless BIV"

II. Context-Sensitivity

Most language is context-sensitive to some degree or other.

First-pass:

A surface is *flat* iff it has no bumps or deformations.

A surface is *clean* iff all of the dirt has been removed.

Terms like 'no' and 'all' (and 'some', 'every', 'most', etc.) are **quantifiers**; they range over a given domain, and sentences involving them depend for their truth on what that domain contains.

But the **domain of quantification** varies with the context.

E.g. "every glass is empty" may well be true, because it's only quantifying over the glasses on the table.

In some contexts, "the road is flat" is true because we ignore bumps smaller than a pebble (e.g., as we're driving).

In other contexts, "the road is flat" is false, because we only ignore bumps that are much smaller (e.g., as we are thinking of what surface to play marbles on).

Likewise, "The table is clean" is true in normal circumstance, but if the health department is coming, we might no longer ignore the tiny bits of dirt.

So our definitions should really have a qualifier:

A surface is *flat* iff it has no bumps or deformations (psst—except the ones we're properly ignoring).

A surface is *clean* iff all the dirt has been removed (psst—except the dirt we're properly ignoring).

III. Epistemology

Likewise for *knowledge*, says Lewis.

You know that p iff your evidence² rule out every possibility in which *not-p* (psst—except the possibilities we’re properly ignoring).

² = present experiences + memories

Epistemology involves figuring out the rules of properly-ignoring!

Some of Lewis’s rules:

Rule of Actuality: the actual world can never be properly ignored.

Rule of Resemblance: if w relevantly resembles w' and w' is not properly ignored (on account of the other rules), then w is not properly ignored.

Rule of Resemblance is supposed to handle Gettier cases, lottery cases, etc.

Rule of Attention: If you’re *not* ignoring a possibility, than of course you are not *properly* ignoring it.

So any *not-p* possibility you’re paying attention to is one your evidence must rule out for you to know p .

In most scenarios, we can properly ignore skeptical possibilities, and thus can truly claim to know that we have hands.

But discussions of skepticism “destroy our knowledge”! In the sense that raising skeptical scenarios changes the context (via the Rule of Attention) so that we are no longer properly ignoring them.

So the skeptic is like a clean-freak who brings a magnifying glass to look for dirt on the table. When he points to it, it’s hard to continue to insist “the table is clean”; but that’s because he’s uncooperative.

So where does the skeptical argument go wrong?

P1 If you know you have hands, then you know you’re not a BIV.

Closure

P2 You don’t know that you’re not a BIV.

C Therefore, you don’t know that you have hands.

P3 is true in a skeptical context—or, according to Lewis, *any* context in which BIVs have been mentioned.

But in a normal context, both P1 and “you know you have hands” are true—therefore, since Lewis endorses Closure, “you know you’re not a BIV” is *also* true.

But this knowledge is *elusive*, in the sense that you can never truly *ascribe* it, for as soon as you try to, you are no longer properly ignoring the BIV scenario.

Compare: We have a moment of silence. [Moments $t_1 - t_5$]. At t_3 , it was *true* that “everyone is being silent”. But you could not have truly *uttered* that sentence, because in doing so you’d have made it false.

Likewise for “I know I’m not a BIV”

Q1: What do people think of Lewis’s solution to skepticism?

Q2: What does this mean for knowledge-claims in a contested public discourse?

References

Lewis, David, 1996. ‘Elusive Knowledge’. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74(4):549–567.

Stine, G. C., 1976. ‘Skepticism, relevant alternatives, and deductive closure’. *Philosophical Studies*, 29(4):249–261.