Is Knowledge Unanalyzable?

EPISTEMOLOGY, WEEK 8: CONCLUSION OF UNIT 2

Where We Are

- We embarked on the project of trying to analyze knowledge.
- We started with the JTB analysis, which ran into the Gettier problem.
- We looked at a number of subsequent analyses, each of which faced problems of its own.
  - No False Grounds Analysis
  - Causal Analysis
  - Truth-Tracking Analysis

Truth-Tracking Analysis (Recap)

- **Tracking Analysis (First Pass):**
- S knows *p* iff
- 1) *p* is true (truth condition)
- 2) S believes *p* (belief condition)
- 3) If *p* were false, S would not have believed *p* (Sensitivity condition)
- 4) If *p* were true, S would have believed *p* (Adherence condition)

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Applying the Analysis

- **Stopped Clock.** Marcy wants to know the time, so she looks at the clock. The clock reads '3:00'. Since Marcy has no reason to distrust the clock, she forms the belief that it is 3:00. Unbeknownst to Marcy, she's actually looking at a stopped clock. However, it just so turns out that Marcy looked at the clock at exactly 3:00.

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- **Applying Sensitivity:** Marcy knows that it's 3:00 only if the following is true:
- *If it were not 3:00, she would not believe that it is 3:00.*

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- **Applying Sensitivity:** Marcy knows that it's 3:00 only if the following is true:
- *If it were not 3:00, she would not believe that it is 3:00.*
  - FALSE!

Applying the Analysis

- **Coins.** Smith and Jones have both applied for a job. Smith has strong evidence both that Jones will get the job, and that Jones has 10 coins in his pocket. From this Smith infers: *The person who will get the job has 10 coins in his pocket*. As a matter of fact, Smith - not Jones - is actually the person who will get the job. Moreover, it turns out that Smith also has 10 coins in his pocket.

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  - FALSE!

Handling Gettier Cases

- So the Truth-Tracking Analysis correctly predicts that in **Stopped Clock** and **Coins**, the agent's belief does not amount to knowledge.

- But does it handle all Gettier cases?

Handling Gettier Cases

- Recall Dharmottara's case:
- **Smoke and Fire.** A fire has just been lit to roast some meat. The fire hasn't started sending up any smoke, but the smell of the meat has attracted a cloud insects. From a distance, an observer sees the dark swarm above the horizon and mistakes it for smoke. 'There's a fire burning at that spot,' the observer says.
- **Applying Sensitivity:** The observer knows that there's a fire burning at that spot only if the following is true:
- *If there were not a fire burning at that spot, the observer would not believe it.*

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- **Applying Sensitivity:** The observer knows that there's a fire burning at that spot only if the following is true:
- *If there were not a fire burning at that spot, the observer would not believe it.*

  - TRUE!

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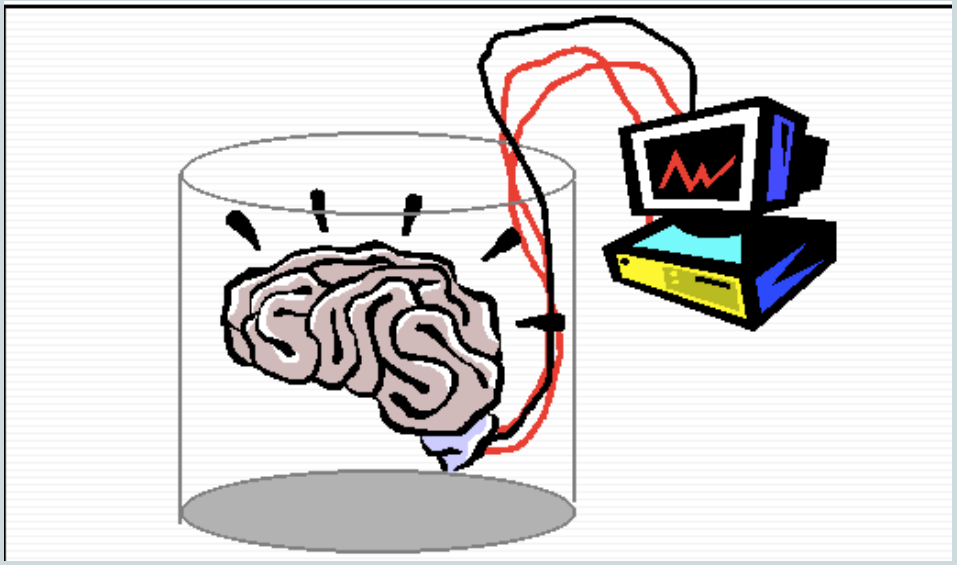
- **4) If *p* were true, S would have believed *p* (Adherence condition)**

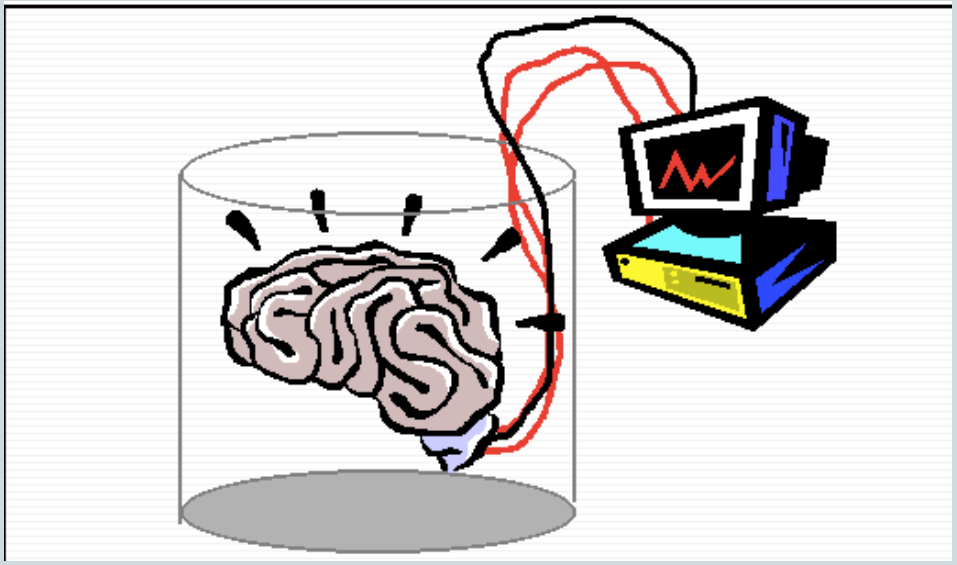
Reasons for Adherence

- Nozick describes the scenario of a brain in a vat that is caused (by the computer programmers) to believe that it *is* a brain in a vat hooked up to a computer program.



Reasons for Adherence

Nozick contends that the BIV does not know that is a BIV hooked up to a computer program, even though the fact that it is a BIV hooked up to a computer program causes this belief.



Reasons for Adherence

But, as Nozick notes, the BIV's belief that it is a BIV hooked up to a computer program **is** sensitive:

If it were not a BIV hooked up to a computer program, it would not believe that it was a BIV hooked up to a computer program.

- *TRUE*

Reasons for Adherence

Still, Nozick claims, the BIV's belief that it is a BIV hooked up to a computer program is not adherent:

- *If the BIV were hooked up to a computer program, it would believe it was a BIV hooked up to a computer program.*

- False (claims Nozick), since there are very similar worlds where the computer programmers did not cause it to believe it was a BIV hooked up to a computer program.

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- False (claims Nozick), since there are very similar worlds where the computer programmers did not cause it to believe it was a BIV hooked up to a computer program.

Reasons for Adherence

- **Dead Dictator**. The dictator of a country has been killed; Sara sees the report on the news, and forms the belief: *The dictator is dead*. The dictator's cronies, fearing a coup, plant a lot of fake evidence indicating that the dictator is still alive (e.g., they release a news bulletin, etc.). However, Sara does not happen to see the "fake news" indicating the dictator is still alive, so she continues to believe that he is dead.

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- Note that Sara's belief is sensitive: if the dictator had not died, she would not have believed he was dead.

Reasons for Adherence

- **Dead Dictator**. The dictator of a country has been killed; Sara sees the report on the news, and forms the belief: *The dictator is dead*. The dictator's cronies, fearing a coup, plant a lot of fake evidence indicating that the dictator is still alive (e.g., they release a news bulletin, etc.). However, Sara does not happen to see the "fake news" indicating the dictator is still alive, so she continues to believe that he is dead.

- However, Nozick argues that her belief is not adherent, since there is a similar possible world in which he dies, but she sees the fake news, and comes to (falsely) believe that he is alive.

Further Reasons for Adherence?

- **Smoke and Fire.** A fire has just been lit to roast some meat. The fire hasn't started sending up any smoke, but the smell of the meat has attracted a cloud insects. From a distance, an observer sees the dark swarm above the horizon and mistakes it for smoke. ‘There's a fire burning at that spot,’ the observer says.

- We saw earlier that the observer’s belief is sensitive. But is it adherent?

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- **H:** *Bob has hands.*
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- **Closure:** If S knows *p*, and *p* logically entails *q*, then S knows *q*.

- **H:** *Bob has hands.* - Known
- **Not BIV:** *Bob is not a (handless) brain in a vat.* – Not known

Abominable Conjunctions

- "Bob knows he has hands, but he doesn't know that he's not a handless Brain in a Vat."

  - sounds incoherent to many

Where does this leave us?

- Two options:

- **A)** Press ahead and try to devise some new analysis of knowledge – one that succeeds where the others have failed.
- **B)** Question whether we should expect an analysis of knowledge in the first place.

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Is knowledge unanalyzable?

Here we'll look at two arguments that the Gettier problem can never be solved, one due to Linda Zagzebski, the other due to Tim Williamson

Zagzebski's Argument

- In "The Inescapability of Gettier Problems", Linda Zagzebski argues that the Gettier problem is *inescapable*: for any candidate analysis of knowledge, we'll always be able to come up with further Gettier problems that refute it.

Zagzebski's Argument: Set Up

- Define *warrant* as the property that belief needs to possess, in addition to truth, if the belief is to amount to knowledge.

Zagzebski's Argument: Set Up

So if knowledge is analyzable, the analysis will take the form, "K = T + B + W", i.e.:

- S knows p iff:
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- So the project of analyzing knowledge now becomes the project of analyzing warrant.

Zagzebski's Argument: Set Up

Note: this leave open the possibility that warrant (W) is itself a combination of further conditions. For example, one could propose that *warrant* = *justification* + *being based on no false grounds* + …

Zagzebski's Argument: The Dilemma

- Zagzebski proceeds to present a dilemma for any analysis of warrant.

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- Zagzebski proceeds to present a dilemma for any analysis of warrant.

- The dilemma is this:
  - Either warrant entails truth, or it does not.

Clarification

- To say that warrant entails truth means that you can only have a warranted belief if that belief is true:

- i.e., Warrant entails truth if and only if whenever anyone (anywhere, at any time) has a warranted belief, their belief is true.

Zagzebski's Argument: The Dilemma

- Zagzebski's dilemma:
  - Either warrant entails truth, or it does not.

First Option: Warrant entails truth

- Suppose we say: Warrant entails truth.
- Zagzebski argues that if we go with this option, then any analysis of knowledge will be *overly demanding*, and lead to skepticism
- Idea here is that my grounds for holding some ordinary belief – e.g., that I am sitting in front of a computer - very rarely entail that the belief in question is true, since they are logically compatible with various skeptical hypotheses.

Second Option: Warrant does not entail truth

- Suppose instead we say: Warrant does not entail truth.

- Zagzebski argues that if we go with this option, then we have a general two-step recipe for constructing a Gettier case that undermines your preferred theory of warrant.

Second Option: Warrant does not entail truth

- **Step One:** Describe a "bad luck" case where a subject S has a warranted belief, but that belief is false.
  - This will be possible, since we are assuming that warrant does **not** entail truth.

Second Option: Warrant does not entail truth

- **Step One:** Describe a "bad luck" case where a subject S has a warranted belief, but that belief is false.

- **Step Two:** Sprinkle some "good luck" onto the "bad luck": modify the case by stipulating that the belief is true, but the truth is unconnected to the warrant.

- Zagzebski contends that this will give us a Gettier case.

Example

- **Step One:** Mary has very good eyesight, but not infallible. She sees someone who looks just like her husband sitting in his customary armchair. The lighting conditions are good, etc. She believes: *My husband is in this room*.

"Bad luck": It turns out that she is actually looking at her husband's twin brother, even though she had no good reason to think her husband's brother was around.

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- **Step Two:** "Good luck": It turns out that her husband is in fact in the room, standing behind her.

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- **Step Two:** "Good luck": It turns out that her husband is in fact in the room, standing behind her.

- Zagzebski claims that this gives us a Gettier case, since intuitively Mary does not know her husband is in the room.

Zagzebski's Argument (Summary)

- 1) Either warrant (W) entails truth or it does not.
- 2) If W entails truth, then any analysis of the form, "K = T + B + W" will be false, since it will lead to skepticism.
- 3) If W is does not entail truth, then any analysis of the form, "K = T + B + W" will be false, since it will face counterexamples.
- 4) No analysis of the form,"K=T+B+W" is correct. (from 1, 2, 3)

Questions to Consider

- Do you find this argument persuasive? Are there any ways of objecting to the premises?

- Even if knowledge cannot be analyzed in terms of "K = T + B + W", can we analyze knowledge along different lines? What would such an analysis look like?

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- Is this too quick? Consider the view that warrant = sensitivity.

- Recall that a belief that *p* is sensitive iff were *p* false, the subject would not have believed *p*. So if a belief is sensitive, it is true (after all, if it were false, it would not have been held!).

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- **2) If W entails truth, then any analysis of the form, "K = T + B + W" will be false, since it will lead to skepticism.**
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- Recall that a belief that *p* is sensitive iff were *p* false, the subject would not have believed *p*. So if a belief is sensitive, it is true (after all, if it were false, it would not have been held!).
- So sensitivity entails truth: whenever a belief is sensitive, it is true.

Side point

- So sensitivity entails truth: whenever a belief is sensitive, it is true.

- Note: this shows that the truth condition in Truth-Tracking Analysis was redundant, since (2) and (3) entail (1):

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Zagzebski's Argument (Summary)

- **2) If W entails truth, then any analysis of the form, "K = T + B + W" will be false, since it will lead to skepticism.**
- Is this too quick? Consider the view that warrant = sensitivity.
- Sensitivity entails truth: whenever a belief is sensitive, it is true.
- But it's not clear that a sensitivity requirement leads to (complete) skepticism: after all, my belief that I'm in front of a computer right is sensitive.

Williamson's Argument

- Williamson offers a somewhat different argument that knowledge is unanalyzable.

Williamson's Argument

- "The increasingly gerrymandered definitions were obvious signs of a degenerating research program. … they succumbed one after another to counterexamples. Moreover, no prior reason to expect knowledge to have such an analysis withstood scrutiny. Evidence accumulated that few if any words of natural language are understood by means of complex definitions."

Expanding Williamson's Argument

- **Claim:** Not all concepts can be given a non-circular analysis, on pain of infinite regress

Expanding Williamson's Argument

For example, consider the following textbook example of a successful conceptual analysis:

S is a bachelor iff S is unmarried male.

- Note that this analysis analyzes bachelor in terms of two further concepts, *unmarried* and *male*, but does not try to define these concepts.

Expanding Williamson's Argument

Now, we could try to define these further concepts:

S is unmarried iff S is not married

But this definition will in turn rely on further concepts – e.g., "not" and "married" – which in turn gives rise to the question of how to analyze these concepts.

Expanding Williamson's Argument

- **Claim:** Not all concepts can be given a non-circular analysis, on pain of infinite regress

- So why expect that knowledge can be given an analysis? Maybe instead knowledge is a primitive concept – one that cannot be successfully analyzed in more basic terms.

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Expanding Williamson's Argument

- OK, but is there any positive reason to think that knowledge is unanalyzable?

- One reason that Williamson mentions is the dismal track record of failed attempts to solve the Gettier problem: he thinks this provides inductive evidence that knowledge is unanalyzable.

- *Question for consideration:* Do you find this argument convincing? Is the failure of attempts to solve the Gettier problem to date good reason to think that we will never be able to solve it?

Semantic Universals and Primitives

- Anna Wierzbacka's work on semantic universals and primitives:

- Idea is that there are some concepts that are *universal*, in that they occur in every language, and they are *primitive*, in that they cannot be defined in more basic terms.

Semantic Universals and Primitives

- Some (putative) examples:
- *I, you, something, more, know, feel, good, bad*

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Where to Now?

- Suppose we agreed that knowledge is unanalyzable. Where would this leave us?

Knowledge First?

- In *Knowledge and its Limits*, Williamson develops a "Knowledge First" epistemology. Basic idea:

- Knowledge is unanalyzable. However, we can use suggests that we can use knowledge to analyze other terms of epistemological interest.

Example #1: Belief

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- Williamson suggests we might try to define belief in terms of knowledge: belief is a sort of "would be" knowledge, i.e.:

- Beliefs are the products of cognitive faculties whose function is to produce knowledge.

Example #2: Justification

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- This is a question we will be tackling in more detail in the upcoming weeks. But to preview: one popular view holds that we can explain justification in terms of evidence.

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- **Evidentialism (rough statement):** A belief is justified iff it is supported by evidence.

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- Williamson suggests that the notion of evidence should itself be understood in terms of knowledge: your evidence at a time just consists in your knowledge.

- On this view, justification is understood in terms of evidence, which is in turn understood in terms of knowledge.

Where We Are

- We embarked on the project of trying to analyze knowledge.
- We started with the JTB analysis, which ran into the Gettier problem.
- We looked at a number of subsequent analyses, each of which faced problems of its own.
  - No False Grounds Analysis
  - Causal Analysis
  - Truth-Tracking Analysis
- We went on to consider whether we should expect a successful analysis of knowledge in the first place.

Up Next

- How should we understand justification?

Discussion Questions

- 1) Do you find either Zagzebski or Williamson's arguments that knowledge is unanalyzable convincing? Why or why not?

- 2) Can you think of a better analysis of knowledge that avoids some of the problems facing the analyses we've covered?