

# In Defense of Nozick Knowing

Robert Nozick defended the sensitivity condition of knowledge in his 1981 essay *Knowledge and Skepticism* – a condition on knowledge which suggests that in order for someone *S* to know some proposition *P*, that if *P* was false, *S* would no longer believe it. Since the publication of Nozick's essay, the sensitivity condition has not ceased to be under fire by the likes of Ernest Sosa or Saul Kripke, but the beefed up account of knowledge given by Nozick is not quite as vulnerable as the sensitivity condition alone. Nozick's account of knowledge I believe is one of the best when considered with regard to how well it agrees with our intuitions on assigning knowledge. It works well for necessary truths, extreme Gettier cases, and skeptical propositions. In this paper, I will first describe why Nozick's account is appealing in its own right, before I consider several objections to Nozick's theory of knowledge, responding to each.

## Appeal of Nozick's Theory of Knowledge

The overall benefits of Nozick's account of knowledge are few, simple, and each of great importance. Firstly, and most importantly Nozick's conditions for knowledge do not lead to regress or contradiction and they are not vulnerable to any kind of Gettier case. Kripke and Sosa would likely disagree with this claim for several specific cases which I will approach directly in §*Response to Objections*, but for the vast majority of ordinary cases this claim is incontrovertible.

Nozick's theory continues to intuitively function well for knowledge of logical truths. The vacuous satisfaction of sensitivity when applied to logical truths is not helpful, but the adherence condition, combined with a consistent method for finding a belief, captures knowledge of any kind of logical or mathematical truth in a perfectly intuitive way:

Where P is a mathematical truth,

1. S believes P by some method M
2. in near possible worlds, using the same M, S believes P.

Then Nozick tackles skeptical arguments. Here he does something few epistemologists are willing to do and grants the viability of skeptical premises while maintaining that knowledge is in fact possible at the same time. This may superficially seem to detract from the intuitive luster of Nozick's account, but he argues – and I agree – that an account of knowledge which does not acknowledge and explain the force of skeptical arguments ceases to be intuitive, since there is a strong sense in which the skeptical arguments *are* intuitive (Nozick 262). If they weren't, then we would not be so tied up in defending against them. The way Nozick manages this tension of allowing skeptical premises without denying knowledge in general is technically sound and quite simple, but I think the higher level moves are more interesting. By accepting skeptical premises under his account, Nozick betrays an important kind of intellectual humility: the understanding that most or all knowledge is contingent upon things which we cannot fully

comprehend, and that in spite of this we can still act upon that knowledge and take it to be true with regard to our limited and distinctly human perspective. In Kantian terms, Nozick validates the knowledge we can have of phenomena while recognizing our incomprehension of the noumena undergirding it.

But, why should such intellectual humility be valuable for knowledge theorists anyway? On the face of it there doesn't seem to be any great reason we should be forced to qualify every piece of valid phenomenal knowledge. One could easily argue that such an exercise quickly becomes a meaningless technicality with no practical importance, and that we may as well speak of knowledge without the asterix. I respond simply that I personally believe humility to be a virtue worth practicing, although I will not argue for that in this paper.

## Response to Objections

Ernest Sosa has three important objections to Nozick's theory of knowledge which he lays out in his essay, *How to Defeat Opposition to Moore*, while defending his new condition for knowledge: *safety*. The first objection levelled by Sosa is the strongest, when he illustrates that Nozick's account of knowledge permits what is known as *abominable conjunctions* (Sosa 282). The kind of conjunctions Sosa refers to arise from Nozick's generous attitude towards skeptical premises such as, "I do not know that I am not a brain-in-a-vat", and the admission of non-closure of knowledge. Strange statements about knowledge are now permitted – the classic example being "I do not know that I am not a brain-in-a-vat, but I know that I have hands."

Opponents of sensitivity have labeled these conjunctions as abominable, but there is a strong sense in which these conjunctions are intuitive (drawing from a contextualist intuition). Sosa himself does not argue over intuitions in this case, but points out a more glaring flaw: if knowledge entailment is not closed, then deduction is not possible, and Nozick does not sufficiently explain this move. There seems to be no parsimonious metaphysical reason why deduction from premises should not be possible, but I argue there is a coherent psychological reason for this. The kind of knowledge in discussion is the kind stored in flawed human brains. It is well known that everyone holds at least a few cognitive dissonances. Beliefs inside a human mind do not interact logically like propositions in a formal language, so if some kind of deduction is actually possible in a human mind, then it must not be *true* deduction. Perhaps what humans have instead is a kind of deduction emulator which is built upon intuitive, non-logical, inferences. We can call this *deduction\**. Deduction\* may very well produce the same results as true deduction for the vast majority of cases, but we cannot assume it to be infallible nor can we assume it to work in the same formalized ways. Thus, we can rest easy with the claim that knowledge entailment is not closed, since there is a sense in which human deduction is indeed impossible. The items we learn through deduction\* are only 99.99% probably true, and we intuitively call such items knowledge anyhow.

The next objection Sosa has with Nozick's account is his claim that it does not capture the modal relationship of knowledge with truth. To support this claim, he gives the counterexample of the knowledge of the bag being thrown down the trash chute, which he claims will not be captured correctly by Nozick's account (Sosa 283). Although this particular example is not incredibly compelling, since bags get stuck in chutes on a regular basis in near possible

worlds, the general idea of the counterexample makes sense – that we may intuitively attribute knowledge when the acknowledged proposition is “only” 99.99% probably true, such as in the case of deduction\* discussed previously. Nozick’s account can get around this issue by simply stipulating that such highly improbable events as the trash getting snagged in a particularly smooth chute are, although possible, not considered to be in the *nearest* possible worlds. Nozick’s subjunctive conditionals only apply to the nearest possible worlds, and if the trash does not get stuck, then we can use nearest-possible-worlds-sensitivity to assign knowledge to the relevant subject of the trash not getting stuck. On the other hand, in the obscure world where the trash does get stuck: believing the trash to be in the bin is a false belief and therefore not eligible for knowledge, just as we would expect.

The final objection from Sosa I will address is the supposed mismanagement of knowledge of necessary truth in Nozick’s account. Sosa simply claims that:

“Sensitivity is doubtful as a condition for our being correctly said to have knowledge of any apodictically necessary truth A, given how hard it would be to make sense of the supposition that not-A. This problem leads Nozick himself to abandon the requirement of sensitivity for such truths.” (Sosa 283)

As discussed earlier, Nozick’s account actually handles knowledge of necessary truths well using the adherence condition and method consistency. Sosa’s objection here seems to be aimed at a more traditional implementation of the sensitivity condition rather than particularized to Nozick’s sophisticated implementation of sensitivity, so we can safely put aside this objection when defending Nozick’s account.

Kripke is also a loud dissident of Nozick's account of knowledge. He provides several Gettier cases which should demonstrate Nozick's theory failing to capture intuitions on knowledge. One such example is Kripke's red and green barn case (SEP 5.1), which I take to be representative of his other examples. In this Gettier case, genuine barns are always green and fake barns are always red. Kripke suggests that according to Nozick's knowledge conditions, an observer from the road when looking upon a red barn can know that there is a red barn, but cannot know there is a barn. This falls out according to the sensitivity condition: if there were no barn, one still might believe there to be. This initially seems compelling, however on closer inspection it seems Kripke is misusing Nozick's method machinery. If the barn was green, then one would not have a tracking belief about whether what they are looking at is a barn. But given that the barn is red and the method for knowing the presence of red barn is a particular method that is distinct from the methods for knowing the presence of other colors of barns (perhaps using a particular kind of cones in the eye which absorb red light) – given all that, the red barn may be successfully categorized as both a red barn and a *barn* using that same red barn method, whereas the green barn method is distinct from the red barn method but cannot allow knowledge of barn-hood.

This is admittedly a strange sounding defense, but such is required to deal with such a strange scenario. Along simpler lines however I would say that Gettier cases themselves are unintuitive, and any arguments made with them to demonstrate the weakness of a theory of knowledge should be subject to scrutiny on whether the theory's break from intuitions comes from a limitation of the theory in dealing with such a case, or rather directly from the strangeness

of the case itself. The intuitive concept of knowledge was built up by linguistic communities of long ago who were in general not experiencing these kinds of bizarre situations. Our intuitive concept of knowledge may just not map onto these unintuitive cases, and arguing over how it *should* would be arrogantly taking conscious control of what would normally play out in a long term process of cultural evolution.

### **Works Cited**

Nozick, Robert. *Knowledge and Skepticism*.

Sosa, Ernest. *How to Defeat Opposition to Moore*.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. *The Analysis of Knowledge*.