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Theory of Knowledge

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Fake Barn Objection of Truth Tracking

The Truth Tracking Account of Knowledge (TTAK), is a series of conditionals, and if all true, this account grants knowledge. Like with many accounts of knowledge, the TTAK is based off of one’s true belief. After establishing a proposition as a true belief, we can discuss the two conditionals specific to the TTAK. These are as follows: (a) If some proposition(w) is true, X would believe them to be true and (b) if some w is false, X would not believe them to be true. Nozick would suggest that if X possesses a true belief and tracks the belief through these two specific conditions, then that individual possesses knowledge. The TTAK addresses the Gettier problem, which is the larger problem of one believing a true proposition and being justified in their belief. This is what we call a Justified-True-Belief (JTB) However, in a Gettier case, they still do not possess knowledge, typically because this a JTB is true on the basis of luck only. Therefore, complicating how we can assert knowledge over a proposition. Accounts of knowledge such as the TTAK attempt to solve these. However, in this paper I will defend the TTAK. I will do this by illustrating how a common objection to the TTAK, ‘Fake Barns’ is unsound.

When discussing the TTAK, it is critical to understand the idea of closest possible world in addition to the TTAK itself. The idea of a closest possible world is that if we take the world exactly as it is today. We must picture this world that has only one particular detail changed. In our minds we must attempt to keep every detail other than the one changed the same or as close to the same as possible. This method of thinking allows for us as epistemologists to get understand knowledge from yet another angle.

A common objection to the Truth Tracking Account of Knowledge follows from if Joe is driving through fake barn country. In this example, Joe is driving down a road and he sees gray barns to the left and right of him, except for one red barn. He however does not know that the gray barns are all barn facades, and the red barn he is looking at is the only real barn. In this example, Joe points to the red barn and states, “I know this is a red barn”. If we apply the TTAK to this new example, here is what follows. (1) Joe has a true belief the barn is in-fact red. (3) If this was a red barn, he would believe it to be a red barn. (4) If this was not a red barn, he would not believe it to be a red barn, it would be gray. Therefore, Nozick’s account would suggest that Joe does know that there is a red barn there. However, at the same time, Nozick’s account would suggest that he does not know that there is a barn there. This granting of knowledge causes a major inconsistency. If Joe knows there is a red barn there, it would follow that there is a barn there. However, many critical epistemologists argue Nozick’s account would not allow for this.

In response to those who reject the TTAK still, I will oblige them by walking through how it does not follow that Joe knows there is a barn there even though he knows there is a red barn there. To do so, we will track the truth as to whether Joe has knowledge that there is a barn there. (1) Joe has a true belief that there is a barn there. (2) If there was a real barn there (the case at hand), Joe would believe there was a barn there. (3) If there was not a real barn there, in the closest possible world, it would be replaced by a gray barn façade. In this case, Joe would still believe that there was a barn there. This is because he does not understand the pattern of the barns (red barns are real, gray barns are facades). Therefore, Nozick’s account would not grant knowledge to Joe in the case that he knows a barn is there. This follows the objection above is one stated by many critics.

To describe how their objection is unsound, I will break Joe’s belief that there is a red barn there into that he is believing two separate things. Tracking the truth on Joe’s belief goes as follows: 1) Joe has a true belief that there is a red barn there. 2) There is a red barn there and Joe believes there is a red barn there. 3) If there was not a red barn there, Joe would not believe there was a red barn there, instead he would believe there is a gray barn there. Breaking this into smaller pieces, we can track the truth on the fact that there is a barn there and the fact that whatever he is looking at is red. I have already tracked the truth on whether there is a barn there, and it is clear that he does not possess knowledge. However, if we track the truth on the fact that what he is looking at is red we come to the following: 1) Joe has a true belief that what he is looking at is red. 2) The object he is looking at is red and as such he believes the object he is looking at to be red. 3) If it was not red, he would believe the object was gray instead. Therefore, he possesses knowledge that whatever he is looking at is in fact red, however he does not know for a fact that he is looking at a barn. If we use this approach to the TTAK, by tracking the truth on a smaller scale, breaking a larger truth tracker into smaller pieces. We can defend the Truth Tracking Account of Knowledge from many of the objections that typically are waged against the account.

With the above in mind, the fake barn objection to the TTAK is unsound. Through this essay, I have explained the Truth Tracking Account of Knowledge and why it exists, alongside how to use it. I then described a major objection for this account and defeated it. From this it is safe to say that the TTAK remains a prominent account of knowledge, used by many externalists.