Nozick and Scepticism

(Weekly supervision essay; written February 16th 2005)

Outline

This essay presents Nozick’s theory of knowledge; demonstrates how it responds to a sceptical argument; presents an argument that suggests that its response to the sceptical argument is wrong; considers an objection to Nozick’s theory in general.

Nozick’s theory of knowledge

Nozick’s theory says that S knows that p if and only if:

1. p is true
2. S believes that p
3. If p were not true, S would not believe that p
4. If p were true, S would believe that p.

The first two conditions are straightforward. The third and fourth require explication.

Condition (3) does not say that not-p entails not-(S believes that p). Rather it says that in all possible worlds in which not-p holds true that are closest to the actual world, not-(S believes that p) is also true. (This is only intended to be a rough explanation of condition (3). We need a metric on the space of possible worlds to make it precise.¹) Similarly, condition (4) does not say that p entails (S believes that p). Rather it says that in all possible worlds in which p holds true that are closest to the actual world, (S believes that p) is also true.

Notice that conditions (3) and (4) are closely related to the causal condition that says that p causes S’s belief that p. There will be many cases in which the fact that p causes S’s belief that p means that conditions (3) and (4) are satisfied. In these cases Nozick’s account agrees with Goldman’s causal theory in its knowledge ascriptions.

¹ Nozick never gives us a metric, and this is hardly surprising; it would be a formidable task. Of course, Nozick has some metric in mind, but it is never formulated. We are expected to get a rough idea of what he has in mind through various examples. See Nozick (2000).
However, the causal theory is not equivalent to Nozick’s account. There will be cases where the causal condition is satisfied but conditions (3) and (4) are not; and there will be cases where conditions (3) and (4) are satisfied, but the causal condition is not.

**Scepticism**

Nozick argues that his theory of knowledge, often known as the conditional theory of knowledge, defeats the following sceptical argument:

1. I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat
2. If a person were to know that p entails q and he were to know that p then he would know that q
3. I know that my sitting here writing an essay entails that I am not a brain in a vat. So,
   C. I do not know that I am sitting here writing an essay.²

The conditional theory of knowledge agrees with the first premise. Suppose that I know that I am not a brain in a vat. Then the following four conditions hold:

i) It is true that I am not a brain in a vat
ii) I believe that I am not a brain in a vat
iii) If I were a brain in a vat, I would not believe that I am not a brain in a vat
iv) If I were not a brain in a vat, I would believe that I am not a brain in a vat.

Condition iii) certainly does not hold: irrespective of whether or not I am a brain in a vat in the actual world, in all possible worlds in which I am a brain in a vat that are closest to the actual world, I believe that I am not a brain in a vat. Since condition iii) is false, Nozick’s theory tells us that I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat.

Nozick also agrees with the third premise, however, he disagrees with the conclusion. Consider the following four conditions:

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² Of course the sceptical argument does not only purport to show that I do not know that I am sitting here writing an essay. Rather it purports to show that I do not know almost anything. ‘I am sitting here writing an essay’ can be substituted by any sentence describing some ordinary state of affairs.
i) It is true that I am sitting here writing an essay

ii) I believe that I am sitting here writing an essay

iii) If I were not sitting here writing an essay, I would not believe that I am sitting here writing an essay (i.e., in the closest worlds in which I am not sitting here writing an essay I do not believe that I am)

iv) If I were sitting here writing an essay, I would believe that I am sitting here writing an essay (i.e., in the closest worlds in which I am sitting here writing an essay I do believe that I am).

Conditions ii), iii), and iv) are true (according to Nozick), so if it is true that I am sitting here writing an essay, then I know that I am sitting here writing an essay. Contrast this to the case of being a brain in a vat. Even if it is the case that I am not a brain in a vat, since condition iii) does not hold, I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat.

So Nozick agrees with the first and third premises of the sceptical argument, and its conclusion. If the argument is valid then he must reject the second premise. This is what he does.

The second premise is known as the closure principle, because it asserts that knowledge is closed under known logical implication. The conditional theory of knowledge rejects the closure principle because neither condition (3) nor condition (4) is closed under known logical implication. For it may be true that

(3) If p were not true, S would not believe that p, and
(K) S knows that p entails q

but this is not enough to ensure that

(3)* If q were not true, S would not believe that q.

To give an example, suppose that p is the statement ‘S was born in London’ and q is the statement ‘S was born on Earth’. It is possible that (3) and (K) be true and (3)* not true. There is no reason to suppose that the truth of (3) and (K) is enough to ensure that in the closest worlds in which S was not born on Earth, S does not believe that he was born on Earth. Thus the third condition of the conditional theory of truth is not
closed under known logical implication, and so knowledge is not closed under known logical implication. This is how Nozick claims to have beaten the sceptical argument, and most importantly its sceptical conclusion.

**DeRose’s objection**

Keith DeRose asserts that rejecting the closure principle is counter-intuitive. He writes:

> Accepting his [Nozick’s] treatment involves embracing the abominable conjunction that while you don’t know you’re not a bodiless (and handless!) BIV [brain in a vat], still, you know you have hands.³

Roughly, DeRose’s own reply to the sceptical argument proceeds by rejecting its first premise. DeRose is an epistemic contextualist. According to contextualist epistemological theories the truth-value of a knowledge ascription is sensitive to certain facts about the speaker and hearers of the context. Further, there are some contexts in which it is legitimate to say that S knows that he is not a brain in a vat—perhaps, for example, when it is true that S is not a brain in a vat and he is ignoring⁴ the possibility that he is a brain in a vat. In these contexts the first premise of the sceptical argument fails, and consequently, the sceptical conclusion does not follow.

Both Nozick and the contextualists have well worked theories that succeed in taking some of the force out of the sceptical argument. We have already seen why it might be argued that Nozick’s theory is counter-intuitive. Is contextualism counter-intuitive? Is it counter-intuitive to suppose that one speaker could truly say ‘S knows that p’ while at the same time another speaker in a different context truly says ‘S does not know that p’? Perhaps it is. The contextualist might offer us the analogy of flatness to demonstrate otherwise. It does seem that one speaker could truly say that ‘X is flat’ while at the same time a speaker in another context truly says that ‘X is not flat’. For example, a driver on a road may truly say that the road is flat, while at the same time an engineer looking for bumps may truly say that the road is not flat. By this analogy

³ DeRose (2000:489)
⁴ By ignoring we mean not thinking of in any way, rather than being aware of the possibility but putting it aside. See Lewis (2000) for the detail.
contextualists hope to persuade us that their way of viewing knowledge ascriptions is not counter-intuitive.

A second objection

There is another argument against Nozick. To present this argument we can do no better than quote Keith Lehrer:

Some forms of externalism repudiate justification as a condition of knowledge, according to Nozick and Dretske, for example. Such accounts may provide an interesting account of what it is like for belief to constitute correct information or to track truth, but they provide no account of knowledge. The reason is that no one knows that what she accepts is true when it would have been just as reasonable for her to have accepted the opposite on the basis of her information. A necessary normative condition of a person knowing that p is that it be more reasonable for her to accept that p than to accept the denial of p on the basis of her information. This condition implies the need for a justification condition…

The objection is another appeal to our intuition. Nozick’s account does not require the bearer of knowledge to be able to discern some justification for their true belief. Lehrer argues that this runs counter to our intuitive understanding of what it is to know something.

I think that Lehrer’s argument has force—it does have intuitive appeal—but there are good reasons why Nozick’s theory has the form that it does. Suppose that we were to respond to Lehrer’s objection by positing the following theory of knowledge:

S knows that p if and only if:

1. p is true
2. S believes that p

The argument may well apply to contextualist theories. However, this requires investigation. As I am not presenting a contextualist theory in detail in this essay, unfortunately I will not establish whether or not the argument can affect any particular contextualist theory.

Lehrer (2000:394)
(3) S has good, but not necessarily conclusive, reasons for believing that p, and these reasons are accessible to him on reflection.

The obvious inadequacy of this theory is that it faces Gettier problems. Consider the following example:

I think that Nogot owns a Ford, because I have seen him driving one; but unbeknownst to me he does not own the Ford he drives, or any other Ford. Unbeknownst to me, Havit does own a Ford, though I have no reason to think so because he never drives it, and in fact I have often seen him taking the tram.\(^8\)

Suppose that p is the statement ‘One of Nogot and Havit owns a Ford’. I believe that p; p is true; and I have good reasons for believing that p, and these reasons are accessible to me. So our simple theory says that I know that p. However, we would not want to say that I know that p because my belief is only correct coincidentally.

Nozick’s account avoids Gettier problems (indeed, it was motivated by the need to solve Gettier problems) by supplementing true belief (conditions (1) and (2)) with the two subjunctive conditionals, conditions (3) and (4). (See the first section of this essay.) Perhaps we could combine our simple theory with Nozick’s theory, thus meeting Lehrer’s objection and Gettier problems. Consider the following theory:

S knows that p if and only if:

(1) p is true
(2) S believes that p
(3) S has good, but not necessarily conclusive, reasons for believing that p, and these reasons are accessible to him on reflection
(4) If p were not true, S would not believe that p
(5) If p were true, S would believe that p.

\(^7\) To ask for conclusive reasons would very likely invite back in the sceptic; it would very likely leave us not knowing almost anything.

\(^8\) This example is taken from Lewis (2000:508)
But this theory won’t work either. It succeeds in avoiding Gettier problems, but would probably not satisfy Lehrer. Consider the following example:

Geoff is waiting outside Mr. Smith’s office to see Mr. Smith. He sees Mr. Smith’s identical twin go into the office, whom he mistakes for Mr. Smith (he doesn’t know that Mr. Smith has an identical twin). Mr. Smith’s secretary tells Geoff that Mr. Smith is in his office—not because she saw his identical twin go in, but because she knows that Mr. Smith is in the office and always reports correctly what she knows about the location of Mr. Smith. Suppose further that Geoff has fallen in love with Mr. Smith’s secretary (this is the first time that he has seen her) and would believe anything that she tells him. He has no idea that she also happens to be completely trustworthy in her reporting the location of Mr. Smith.

In the example conditions (1) to (5) are met: Mr. Smith is in his office; Geoff believes that Mr. Smith is in his office; Geoff has good reasons for believing that Mr. Smith is in his office—namely, he saw somebody identical to Mr. Smith entering Mr. Smith’s office; if Mr. Smith were not in his office, Mr. Smith’s secretary would tell Geoff that Mr. Smith was not in his office, and Geoff would not believe that Mr. Smith was in his office; if Mr. Smith were in his office in similar circumstances, then Geoff would still believe that Mr. Smith was in his office. However, we would not want to say that Geoff knows that Mr. Smith is in his office. Although the theory improves on Nozick’s theory in so far as it requires of the bearer of knowledge that he have good (and accessible) reasons for his belief, it still allows that his reasons be the wrong reasons. In the case of Geoff, his reason—this was that he saw Mr. Smith go into his office—was the wrong reason.

**Conclusion**

First we considered DeRose’s objection to Nozick’s reply to the sceptical argument. DeRose asserts that it is counter-intuitive to reject the closure principle, and that it is better to adopt contextualism as a response to scepticism. I think he may be right that contextualism provides a more plausible response, although I have not considered contextualism in depth in this essay. Second, we considered a more general objection to Nozick, made by Lehrer. This objection certainly has force and it is also hard to see
what the solution is. We saw two naïve theories fail to provide the answer. It is conceivable that some form of contextualism will offer a solution, although I have not had time to investigate that here.

Bibliography


