Defining Knowledge III: Tracking the Truth

Tracking the Truth

- Reliabilism: One has knowledge if the process by which he/she acquired the given belief is reliable.
- Robert Nozick's theory is a kind of reliabilism.
- X knows that p if and only if:

  (1) X believes that p
  (2) p is true
  (3) If p were not true, then X would not believe it.
  (4) If p were true, then X would believe it.

- Conditions 3 and 4 replace the condition of justification with subjunctive conditionals.
- Aim: To eliminate accidental truth cases.

Subjunctive/Counterfactual Conditionals

- The antecedent of such conditionals is false/unsatisfied.

  'If Shakespeare hadn't written Hamlet, someone else would have'

  'If Oswald hadn't killed Kennedy, someone else would have'

- Science makes many counterfactual claims

  Examples:

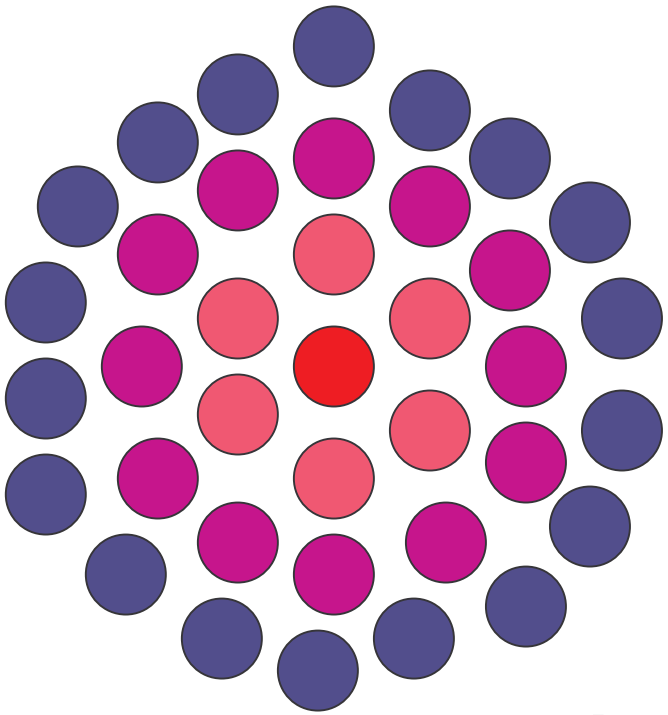
  (1) Had the initial conditions of the universe been slightly different, there would not be any life on earth.

  (2) Were there no forces to act on a body, it would continue at rest or in uniform motion along a straight line.

- Questions: How are we to understand counterfactuals? What is their meaning? What are their truth-conditions?

Possible World Semantics

- Truth conditions become relations between possible worlds.
- The counterfactual ‘if ϕ were the case, ψ would be the case’ holds in the actual world *if and only if* ψ holds in all ϕ-worlds which are closest to the actual world.



- The closer the world, the less different from the actual world.

Red: Actual world

Pink: Closest possible worlds

Violet: Further-away possible worlds

Blue: Furthest possible worlds

Condition 3

- Nozick calls his view ‘truth tracking’ because our belief ‘tracks the truth’ or ‘is sensitive to the truth’ among close possible worlds.

- Condition 3: If p were not true, then X would not believe p.

  In terms of Possible Worlds: ‘In close possible worlds where p is not true, X does not believe p’.

- Tackling accidental cases

  Suppose your belief is true by accident. There will be a close possible world where you have that belief but that accident doesn’t happen (p is not true). The third condition is not satisfied, hence you don’t have knowledge.

Example

- Henry and the fake barns revisited

  (1) Henry believes that there is a real barn in this area.

  (2) The proposition ‘There is a real barn in this area’ is true.

  (3) In a close possible world where there is no real barn in this area, Henry would still form the belief that there is one.

  But: The third condition says that if p were not true, X would NOT believe that p. Here X DOES believe that p!!!

  Verdict: Third condition not satisfied so Henry doesn’t know.

Condition 4

- Condition 4: If p were true, then X would believe p.

  In terms of Possible Worlds: ‘In close possible worlds where p is true, X believes p’.

- Tackling accidental cases

  Suppose having the belief is an accident. There will be a close possible world where p is true but that accident doesn’t happen and you don't have that belief. The fourth condition is not satisfied, hence you don’t have knowledge.

Example

- Brain in the vat stimulated to believe that (s)he is a brain in a vat

(1) Robert believes that he is a brain in a vat.

(2) The proposition 'Robert is a brain in a vat' is true.

(3) In a close possible world where Robert is not a brain in a vat, he would not believe that he is a brain in a vat (because he would not be fed this belief).

(4) In a close possible world where Robert is a brain in a vat *but is not fed this belief*, he would not believe that he is a brain in a vat.

But: The fourth condition says that if p were true, X would believe that p. Here he DOES NOT believe that p!!!

Verdict: Fourth condition not satisfied so Robert doesn't know.

The Sceptic

- The sceptic's argument rests on the closure principle, i.e. 'knowledge is closed under known logical implication'.
- The Closure Principle: If you know that p, and that p logically entails q, then according to the closure principle it follows that you know that q.
- The Sceptic's Use of the Closure Principle:

1. I don't know I'm not a brain in a vat - premise
2. I know that (if I'm in a lecture on earth, I am not a brain in a vat) - premise

3. | I know I'm in a lecture on earth - assumption
4. | I know I'm not a brain in a vat - closure 2, 3

5. If I know I'm in a lecture on earth, I know I'm not a brain in a vat - CP 3-4
6. I don't know I'm in a lecture on earth - modus tollens 1, 5

Nozick' Reply to the Sceptic (1)

- Nozick: The closure principle is false. Whether an individual knows a proposition depends on the relevant possible worlds.

- I can know that p, and know that p entails that q without knowing that q.

- Conditions 3 and 4 are not closed under known logical implication.

Nozick' Reply to the Sceptic (2)

EXAMPLE (testing condition 3)

p = I am awake and delivering a lecture in Bristol
q = I am not floating in a tank in Alpha Centauri being stimulated by electrochemical means to believe that p

- I know that p
  If p were false, (suppose I were in my office or at home in Bristol)
  i.e. If p were false, I would not believe that p.
- I know that p entails q
  If p entails q were false, I would not believe that p entails q.
- I do not know that q
  If q were false, (suppose I were floating in a tank in Alpha Cent.)
  i.e. If q were false, I would still believe q.

Problems

- Secretary with twin sister

  (1) Ioannis believes that his secretary is in his office.

  (2) The proposition “Ioannis’ secretary is in his office” is true.

  (3) If her twin sister (and not his secretary) were in his office, Ioannis would still believe his secretary is in his office.

  Nozick: Third condition not satisfied so Ioannis doesn’t know.

  Knowledge: YES

  Intuition: It seems that I do know when I see my real secretary at her desk.

  Reply: If it is not very likely for her twin sister to be in my office, then it is not a close possible world.

Problems 2

- Jesse James

  (1) X believes that the robber is Jesse James.

  (2) The proposition “The robber is Jesse James” is true.

  (3) If the robber were not Jesse James, X would not believe that that the robber is Jesse James.

  (4) If the robber were Jesse James but the mask did not slip off, X would not believe that the robber is Jesse James.

  Nozick: Fourth condition not satisfied so X doesn’t know.

  Knowledge: YES

  Intuition: It seems that X does know that the robber is Jesse James.

Food for Thought

- Can we make do without an epistemic closure principle?
- Is there a way to make precise the notion of close possible worlds?

Reading

- R. Nozick ‘Knowledge and Skepticism’ in Kim and Sosa (eds.) *Epistemology*: *An Anthology*.