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A Problem for Contrastivist Accounts of Knowledge

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Abstract

This paper raises a problem for contrastivist accounts of knowledge. It is argued that contrastivism fails to succeed in providing a modest solution to the sceptical paradox—i.e. one according to which we have knowledge of a wide range of ordinary empirical propositions whilst failing to know the various anti-sceptical hypotheses entailed by them—whilst, at the same time, retaining a contrastivist version of the closure principle of knowledge.

1 Contrastivism

Contrastivism in epistemology is the view that knowledge is not a binary relation between a knower and a proposition but a ternary relation between a knower, S , a proposition known, p , and contrast proposition, q . To know a proposition, p , according to contrastivism, really is to know that p rather than q .¹ Knowledge propositions are represented thus:

(C) $K_s pq^2$

One of the chief motivations for contrastivism is its ability to offer a certain kind of response to the sceptical paradox. The sceptical paradox threatens to show that we do not know most of the things we take ourselves to know because, for instance,

(S1) I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat artificially stimulated to have deceptive experiences as of a physical world.

(S2) If I know that I have hands, then I know that I am not such a brain in a vat.

(S3) So, I do not know that I have hands.³

Contrastivists believe that the first premise, the closure principle which validates the second premise and the negation of the conclusion are highly intuitive. In

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fact, they are considered so intuitive that on a satisfactory analysis of the sceptical paradox each one has to come out true. The response to the sceptical paradox must be what Jonathan Schaffer, one of the main proponents of contrastivism, calls 'modest'. The analysis of knowledge as contrastive makes such a modest response to scepticism viable by, first, making explicit the contrastive structure of the premises and the negation of the conclusion and thereby rendering them compatible and, second, modifying the closure principle so as to allow extensions of knowledge while not falling prey to the sceptic's fatal conclusion. The explicit contrastive structure of (S1), (S2) and the negation of (S3) is this:

(S1*) I do not know that I am handed rather than envatted.

(S2*) If I do not know that I am not envatted rather than envatted then I do not know that I am handed rather than envatted.

(S3*) I know that I am handed rather than amputated.⁴

By contrastivist lights, all of these propositions are true. This is the first step the contrastivist makes to make possible a modest response to the sceptical paradox. I will, for the purposes of this paper, grant the contrastivist that all of (S1*)-(S3*) are true. What I am interested in rather is the contrastivist account of the closure principle, which, recall, is to be preserved by contrastivism. In a recent paper, Jonathan Schaffer, has taken upon himself the task of providing a detailed account of contrastivist closure. He claims that the following four principles capture the sense in which contrastive knowledge is closed.

(Expand-p) $(K_s p_1 q \ \& \ (p_1 \rightarrow p_2) \ \& \ \{p_2\} \cap \{q\} = \{\}) \rightarrow E_s p_2 q$ ⁵

This principle licenses expansion of knowledge. The idea is that if one knows a proposition p_1 vis-a-vis a contrast proposition q , if p_1 entails p_2 , and if the intersecting set of the set containing p_2 and the set containing q is the empty set, one is in a position to know p_2 rather than q .⁶

The second principle mimics the classical principle of closure under conjunction introduction. The idea is that if one knows a proposition p_1 vis-a-vis a contrast proposition q and one knows another proposition p_2 rather than q then one is in a position to know both p_1 and p_2 rather than q .

(Intersect-p) $(K_s p_1 q \ \& \ K_s p_2 q) \rightarrow E_s (p_1 \ \& \ p_2) q$ ⁷

The third principle is a principle that preserves knowledge under contraction of the contrast proposition. Here, the idea is that if one knows a proposition p vis-a-vis a contrast proposition q_1 , if q_1 is entailed by another proposition q_2 and if the set containing q_2 is not the empty set, one is in a position to know p rather than q_2 .

(Contract-q) $(K_s p q_1 \ \& \ (q_2 \rightarrow q_1) \ \& \ \{q_2\} \neq \{\}) \rightarrow E_s p q_2$ ⁸

Finally, the contrastivist endorses a principle that preserves knowledge under union of contrast propositions. The idea is that if one knows a proposition p vis-a-vis a contrast proposition q_1 and one knows p vis-a-vis another contrast proposition q_2 then one is in a position to know p rather than q_1 or q_2 .

(Union-q) $(K_s pq_1 \& K_s pq_2) \rightarrow E_s p (q_1 \vee q_2)$ ⁹

2 A Problem for Contrastivist Accounts of Knowledge

Consider the following case:

(Square 1) I know that the object before my eyes is a square rather than a triangle.

(Square 2) If I am deceived by a malign genius into believing that the object before my eyes is a square, while, in fact, it is a triangle, then it is a triangle.

(Square 3) Therefore, I am in a position to know that the object before my eyes is a square rather than that I am deceived by a malign genius into believing that it is a square while, in fact, it is a triangle.

Note that the new contrast proposition entails the old one. Moreover, the set containing the new contrast proposition does obviously not equal the empty set.¹⁰ Therefore, by Schaffer's own lights, (Square 1)-(Square 3) is a valid instance of Contract-q. But things are worse. For this line of thought can be generalized in the following way:

(P1) One knows that p rather than q .

(P2) If one is deceived by a malign genius into believing that p while as a matter of fact q , then q .

(P3) Therefore, one knows that p rather than that one is deceived by a malign genius into believing that p while as a matter of fact q .

Since, at least for a large number of propositions, p and q , the set containing the proposition that one is deceived, by a malign genius, into believing that p while as a matter of fact q does not equal the empty set, (P1)-(P3) is a template for generating valid instances of Contract-q. This result is unacceptable for Schaffer, though. After all, it shows that, on his premises, we can have a wide range of anti-sceptical knowledge. In this way the results of Contract-q fly in the face of contrastivists' commitment to a modest approach to the sceptical paradox—an approach, that is, according to which we lack anti-sceptical knowledge. Insofar as contrastivists motivate their position by appealing to the need of a modest approach to the sceptical paradox this result undermines the very motivation for their position.

Can Schaffer do without Contract-q? It seems that the answer to this question is 'no'. After all, cases like the following seem to be perfectly fine ways of acquiring knowledge: Sandra knows that Paul was born in Germany rather than in Asia. However, Sandra does not know very much about Asia except that it's a different continent than the one she and Paul inhabit, which is Europe. Now,

Sandra learns that China is a country in Asia. From the fact that Paul was born in Germany rather than in Asia and the fact that China is a country in Asia, she competently deduces and thereupon comes to believe that Paul was born in Germany rather than in China. Intuitively, when Sandra acquires her belief in this way, her belief also qualifies as knowledge. The problem for contrastivists is, of course, that once Contract-q is given up, they can no longer explain this intuition. Contrastivism thus appears to fall prey to a pattern of failure that John Hawthorne has diagnosed as common for accounts of knowledge that deny or otherwise restrict closure: It fails to restrict the closure principle in such a way that it succeeds in predicting that the subject acquires closure-based knowledge in all cases in which, intuitively, she does, whilst avoiding to predict that the subject acquires closure-based knowledge in all cases in which, intuitively, she doesn't.¹¹

In personal communication Schaffer has offered the following response to this objection. First, he points out that whether, by contrastivist lights, one stands in a given knowledge relation to a target proposition and a contrast proposition depends on what error possibilities are in play. Either a world in which the scenario depicted in the antecedent of (P2) is among the error possibilities in play or it isn't. If it is, then since one cannot eliminate this possibility, (P1) turns out to be false.¹² If, on the other hand, such an error possibility isn't in play, then one also cannot access it via Contract-q and so (P3) does not follow. So, in neither case Contract-q generates the problematic anti-sceptical knowledge. In order to explain how contrastive knowledge attributions can still be true in some contexts, Schaffer goes on to embrace contextualism about the content of that-clauses: Which scenarios are denoted by a given that-clause depends in part on the domain of quantification. In consequence, there will be contexts in which the clause "that *q*" at issue in (P1) denotes a set of possibilities that includes the scenario depicted in the antecedent of (P2). In such contexts, the relevant contrastive knowledge attributions will turn out false. On the other hand, there will also be contexts in which the very same clause denotes a set of possibilities that is restricted to non-deception scenarios. In such contexts, as the above argument shows, the relevant contrastive knowledge attributions can continue to be true.

By way of rejoinder to this response, let us first go back to the case of Sandra who knows that Paul was born in Germany rather than in Asia. Since she knows so very little about Asia, before she acquires the information that China is a country in Asia, Sandra is unable to eliminate the possibility that Paul was born in China.¹³ By the lights of Schaffer's response, it follows that we can truly attribute to Sandra knowledge that Paul was born in Germany rather than in Asia only in contexts in which scenarios in which Paul was born in China are not amongst the scenarios denoted by the clause "that Paul was born in Asia". That, however, is rather implausible. Thus suppose that the episode is embedded in the following case: In order to ascertain the extent of his students' geographical knowledge, a teacher designs a multiple choice test including questions such as "Which, if any, of the following sentences are true: A) Paul was born in Germany rather than in Bonn, B) Paul was born in Germany

rather than in China, C) Paul was born in Germany rather than in Asia, D) Paul was born in Germany rather than in the Black Forest".¹⁴ When evaluating his students' answers to this question he may, for instance, truly say something like: "While Peter knows that Paul was born in Germany rather than in China, Sandra only knows that he was born in Germany rather than in Asia." It is clear that, in the teacher's context, the scenario in which Paul was born in China is denoted by the clause "that he was born in Asia". By the lights of Schaffer's above response, however, since Sandra cannot eliminate the possibility that Paul was born in China, it follows that, in the present context, she cannot be truly attributed knowledge that Paul was born in Germany rather than in Asia. Once again, contrastivism passes the wrong verdict.

We thus see that contrastivism's conception of closure runs into serious problems. Initially we found that there is reason to believe that contrastivism falls prey to a pattern of failure common amongst conceptions of knowledge that deny or restrict closure, *viz.* of restricting closure in such a way that, according to the principle, the subject acquires closure-based knowledge when and only when intuitively she does. The failure of Schaffer's attempted solution to this problem highlights that the problem actually has yet another dimension. It is the problem not only of matching our intuitive verdicts regarding closure-based knowledge but also of doing so whilst continuing to match our intuitive verdicts regarding knowledge of the bases of closure-based knowledge. Like the lot of proposals that venture to deal with scepticism by restricting closure, contrastivism fails to do the trick.¹⁵

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Notes

¹Versions of contrastivism have been defended in e.g. Sinnott Armstrong [2004], Blaauw [2004], Karjalainen and Morton [2003] as well as Schaffer [2004, 2005, 2007].

²Schaffer [2007, p. 234].

³Schaffer [2005, pp. 259-60].

⁴Cf. Schaffer [2005, p. 263].

⁵Schaffer [2007, p. 243].

⁶One might wonder why Schaffer requires that the intersection of the set containing the proposition entailed by the proposition known and the set containing the contrast proposition be the empty set. The answer to this is that he construes knowledge as a relation between a knower, a target proposition and a contrast proposition where the contrast proposition and the target proposition are pairwise exclusive, that is, if the target proposition is true, then the contrast proposition must be false. If the intersection between these two sets were not the empty set, then the resulting relation would not be a relation between a knower, a target proposition and a contrast proposition where the target proposition and the contrast proposition are pairwise exclusive. As a consequence, the relation would, on contrastivist premises, not be the knowledge relation. The requirement that the intersection of the set containing the proposition entailed by the target proposition and the set containing the contrast proposition be the empty set is thus vital for Schaffer's expansion principle.

⁷Schaffer [2007, p. 245].

⁸Schaffer [2007, p. 244]. Again, the requirement that the set containing the new contrast proposition, q_2 , which entails the original contrast proposition, q_1 , must not equal the empty set is a natural consequence of contrastivists' construal of knowledge as a ternary relation between a knower, a target proposition and a set of contrast propositions. If the set containing the new contrast proposition were the empty set, then the knowledge obtained by the closure principle would specify a binary relation between a knower and a target proposition. By the lights of contrastivism, however, that relation would not be the knowledge relation. Thus, the requirement that the set containing the new contrast proposition, q_2 , which entails the original contrast proposition, q_1 , must not equal the empty set is vital for the contrastivist's contraction principle.

⁹Schaffer [2007, p. 246].

¹⁰Perhaps Schaffer wants to say that a set containing an inconsistent proposition equals the empty set. Notice, however, that it is quite plausible that the anti-sceptical proposition is not inconsistent. It seems entirely possible that one be so deceived.

¹¹Hawthorne [2005, p. 34].

¹²What is meant by 'elimination' of an error possibility? For present purposes it will suffice to note that Schaffer countenances the following conceptual relation between elimination of error possibilities and the ability to answer questions: "A third point of connection between contrastive knowing and answering is that the elimination of the relevant alternatives constitutes the ability to answer. That is . . . the evidential component of contrastive knowledge is the elimination of the alternatives. Which is what it takes to be able to answer." [Schaffer 2007, p. 241] Moreover, makes the following claim about abilities to answer: "able to answer' denotes an epistemic capacity. It is epistemic in that one may guess rightly without having the requisite ability." [Schaffer 2005, p. 236]

¹³Notice that this is supported by the conceptual relation between the elimination of error possibilities and the ability to answer questions Schaffer countenances (cf. n. 12). Since before she gets the information about China Sandra knows next to nothing about it—for instance, she does not know whether 'China' names a country, a continent, or a city or region in Germany—she cannot correctly answer questions such as whether Paul was born in China or whether Paul was born in Germany rather than in China except by guessing. By Schaffer's lights, then, she is unable to answer such questions. And given the conceptual relation between elimination of error possibilities and ability to answer questions countenanced, she cannot eliminate the possibility that Paul was born in China. (Of course, we can ask Sandra questions that, in conjunction with what she already knows, will enable her to correctly answer such questions without having to guess. This will be the case, for instance, if we put to her the question: "*Exactly one* of the following two sentences is true: which one? A) Paul was born in Germany rather than in China. B) Paul was born in Germany rather than in Europe." However, what enables her to correctly answer this question without having to guess is the additional information contained in the question, *viz.* that *exactly one of the two sentences is true*. It is only with the help of this information that Sandra can eliminate the China possibility. To see this notice that she would not have been able to correctly answer the following question

without guessing: “Which, *if any*, of the following sentences is true: A) Paul was born in Germany rather than in China. B) Paul was born in Germany rather than in Europe.” Given that this is so, it is plausible that, where Sandra has not received the crucial additional information, she is unable to answer questions such as whether Paul was born in China or whether he was born in Germany rather than in China and so cannot eliminate the possibility that Paul was born in China.)

¹⁴Notice that this question does not contain the crucial information that would enable Sandra tick off B) as a correct answer without guessing. So, by the conceptual relation between ability to answer and elimination of error possibilities, here too she cannot eliminate the possibility that Paul was born in China.

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