THE PROBLEM OF TRUTH
IN THE CLASSICAL ANALYSIS OF KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract. In this article I propose a new problem for the classical analysis of knowledge (as *justified true belief*) and all analyses belonging to its legacy. The gist of my argument is that *truth* as a condition for a belief to be knowledge is problematic insofar there is no definition of truth. From this, and other remarks relating to the possibility of defining truth (or lack thereof) and about what truth theories fit our thoughts about knowledge, I conclude that as long as truth is unquestioningly taken as a condition of knowing, knowledge can never be defined in a way that could satisfy our intuitions about it.
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I. Introduction

In his article, Gettier discusses the classical analysis of knowledge as having the general form:

> "S knows that P IFF (*i.e.* if and only if)
>> (i) P is true,
>> (ii) S believes that P, and
>> (iii) S is justified in believing that P."
>>> (Gettier 1963)

This general form is supposed to be equivalent to most other attempts to define knowledge in his day – he offers, as examples, Chisholm's (1957) and Ayer's (1956) analyses. Gettier shows that if condition (iii) is taken as equivalent to "S has adequate evidence

for P" and "S has the right to be sure that P" (of the two authors, respectively), then there are cases that, by the definition, would be knowledge, but nobody would call it knowledge. They would be cases in which the concept would be too large compared to our intuitions about its extension. The similarity between the three conditions is necessary for Gettier's critique, for he bases his argument on the concept of *justification*, the most flexible part of the classical definition.

The "flexibility" of the justification condition is used by Zagzebski (1994) to show how Gettier's examples take away the possibility of any definition of knowledge of the form *x + true belief* (where *x* is a placeholder for justification, Plantinga's (1993) *warrant*, or other conditions that replace justification) or of the form *justified true belief + x* (where *x* is any condition added to the classical analysis, like Clark's (1963) *full grounding*, or some *defeasibility condition*)[1]. The most important conclusion is that "no account of knowledge as true belief plus something else can withstand Gettier objections as long as there is a small degree of independence between truth and the other conditions of knowledge" (Zagzebski 1994, p.72).

In my paper I wish to show that the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief is flawed in yet another way – the condition of the *truth* of the belief to be known. It is to be noted here that truth seems to be an essential condition in all analyses of knowledge – all the authors cited as building definitions of knowledge take it for granted. My point will be a rather pragmatical one, but I hope to show that trying to define knowledge based on the classical analysis is a kind of jumping the gun, precisely because truth isn't investigated enough in the context. Moreover, I arrive at the conclusion that knowledge can not (and it should not be tried to) be satisfactorily defined while keeping the truth condition.

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[1]   Other analyses of knowledge that can be attacked by Zagzebski's arguments are, for example, Sosa's (1964) *objective justifiability*, or Goldman's (1967) *causal connection*.

A methodological remark: the scope of my investigation will be limited to the context of natural language. This choice is due to the fact that the majority of discussions on the topic have been carried out in the same context. At the same time, some of the "instruments" I will be using might be (and legitimately so) considered outdated or not applicable when talking about scientific or mathematical knowledge. But they remain useful when talking about our everyday language.

II. Pseudo-Statements and -Concepts

The first thing to be briefly discussed is the concept of a *pseudo-statement*, as it appears in Carnap's (1932) "Elimination of Metaphysics" – those statements that seem to have meaning, but are actually meaningless. This lack of meaning is due to the presence of *pseudo-concepts* in the expression, terms that have no meaning.

The meaning Carnap talks about is the set of *criteria of application* (Carnap 1932, p. 63) of the term to stuff in the world. A concept is meaningful insofar as we can say about things that they fall under the concept or not, using the criteria of application. Generally, if we would talk about definitions, we would say that the *definiens* has to offer us criteria for using the *definiendum*; the *definiens* must teach us how to use a concept as a name for a thing.

Again, one might feel that this analysis of meaning and language is in some way outdated. What I want to take away from it is the intuitive principle that for a word to be in any way useful, or important, or even meaningful, it must be usable; and, of course, we must be able to use it such that we can make ourselves understood. Another two elements of Carnap's discussion will be useful as well, and maybe even more easily accepted: if a word has no criterion of application, it cannot be used; and if two words have the same criteria of application, they are synonymous (*v.* "teavy" and "toovy", *op. cit.* p. 64).

III. Correspondence

In its classical version, correspondence is the conception that truth is the correspondence of a proposition and facts, or between thoughts and reality *etc.* A couple of well-known formulations of the theory appear in Aristotle (*Metaph.*, 1011b25)[2] and d'Aquino (*Summa Th.*, I, Q.16, A.2, Resp)[3].

This version of the correspondence theory of truth has a problem, that of the undecidability of what is true and what is not. Suppose that in a soundproof and windowless room there are some people. Someone comes in and utters the sentence "There is a green meteorite fallen in the middle of the street" – how would the room-dwellers decide if what the new person said was true?

A *naive* supporter of the correspondence theory would say that all that has to be done is for the people to go outside and check if there is a green meteorite in the street. Say there really is one, and the people compare the proposition they heard with the fact – there is a correspondence, so the proposition is true.

The problem here is that the comparison doesn't happen between the proposition and the fact, but rather between the proposition and new propositions formed by the people themselves. It could be said that the source of this objection is the *in principle* impossibility of getting to the kantian *thing-in-itself* (in another form, the problem is shown by Kant (1992, pp. 557-558) and also, later, by Russell (2004, pp. 79-80)). This problem is the reason for the emergence and evolution of many modern theories of truth, such as coherence and pragmatism.[4]

As such, going back to the previous section, one could say the correspondence theory of truth does not offer any criteria of

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[2]   "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true"

[3]   "A judgment is said to be true when it conforms to the external reality" or, the latin "Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus"

[4]   Of course, this objection is easily by-passed by holding a hard, direct realist view, but it can be said that this kind of view is quite unpopular among philosophers from as early as Plato.

application for truth. Truth, as it is shown by the correspondence theorists, is a *pseudo-concept* – expressions of the form "*p* is true" are *pseudo-statements*, because the conception doesn't tell us when and how to use them.

IV. Doing Away with Correspondence

The fact that truth is a pseudo-concept, at least with an underlying correspondence view about it, means that *knowledge* as *true* belief plus something else is a pseudo-concept too. We cannot apply the term *knowledge* to anything as long as the conjunction that is the *definiens* contains a pseudo-concept.

An attempt to give a criterion of application for truth was using the *coherence* theory as a helping instrument.[5] Truth would remain the correspondence between propositions and facts, but true propositions would be those that are *coherent* with the set of propositions already known to be true. There are two problems here: besides the well-known one of *which* propositions are the ones known to be true, a problem arises in that the correspondence theory becomes completely useless. The fact that truth would be correspondence is obsolete for the new definition – it offers no criteria of application, the criterion being given by the coherence test. It adds nothing to the meaning of truth. As such, again considering Carnap's discussion of "teavy" and "toovy", we are driven to abandon correspondence as having anything to bring to the table.

Being left with a criterion of application but no underlying conception of truth, we may be tempted to extend coherence to account for the conception part too. It would be said that truth *is* coherence. But more and more problems rise up; the previously-mentioned problem of which truths are to be taken as "basic"; the fact that the laws of the excluded middle and of non-contradiction can't be put under the coherence test (Russell 2004, p. 80); and the

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[5] This way of dealing with the problem seems to be discussed by Russel (2004, ch. 12) but he quickly reverts to correspondence.

possibility of there being a set of sentences with which both a sentence *p* and its negation are coherent (as is the case of ZFC and the Continuum Hypothesis; *v.* Woodin 2001).

So, I shall conclude, coherence is not a viable option either. Should we, in the footsteps of Russell, return to some form of correspondence? The answer I propose is negative. The reasons for this answer are the following: Firstly, it is highly implausible that any convincing form of correspondence will ever surpass the main objection, that of the impossibility of getting to the facts or things themselves. Secondly, and this will lead me to the next section, it is doubtful whether we will ever have a satisfying definition of truth, whatever its underlying conception would be – Tarski's result (1956, §1) concerning natural languages, those with which we are concerned too, indicates this.

V. Knowledge without Truth?

To further the discussion I will comment on a couple of objections that could be brought to my analysis. Firstly, one could say that it is dubious that I considered only two perspectives on truth and I claim that the critique can be extended to all others. Secondly, it can be said that it is irrelevant, in the context of defining knowledge, that we have no definition of truth *yet*, because we intuitively know pretty well what the extensions of "truth" and "knowledge" are.

The reason for my considering only the correspondence and coherence theories of truth is that the problem of criteria of application is best shown in the context of the two. The conclusions regarding them can be easily extended – it is not hard to check what criteria (if any) a theory offers for the application of the term "true" as its *definiens*. Moreover, I will shortly argue that the attack on correspondence is the only relevant one, being the only fitting theory for a definition of knowledge.

Regarding the second objection: what it presupposes is that, firstly, there is a definition of truth that hasn't been yet discovered

and which could be inserted as an underlying conception in the definition of knowledge; and, secondly, that at least theoretically we can get to that definition. Both points are debatable. Imagine a group of workers who have just finished building a roof – but independently of some other group of workers, who are building the house on which the roof is to be put. The problem here is that the first group of workers don't have the *certainty* that the roof will fit on the house, or even that the house will ever be finished. We cannot know in advance that we will get to a satisfying definition of truth, on which to base the definition of knowledge; what is more, it doesn't seem that a correspondence-type definition of truth will ever be attained. As good a definition of knowledge we may get, it must rest on the definition of truth and it is useless without the latter. In short, the various analyses of knowledge are *jumping the gun*.

Why would a correspondence theory of truth be the only fitting one for a definition of knowledge? Both science and the common man, in their daily lives, have the (more or less conscious) pretence that when they know something, they know something *about the world*. Claims of science can be considered to be about the objects and stuff in the world or about the structure of the world, depending on the philosophical position. We think that propositions like "the glass is on the table" are also, even though naively so, about the world. We say that we have *knowledge about the world* – about what else could we have it, after all? We want for what we think to be matching what *is*; a kind of correspondence theory comes with our human nature, evidence for this being the fact that our oldest intuitions (philosophical or otherwise) about truth have lead us to the correspondence theory, and they are more or less the same intuitions guiding us today in the pursuit of truth. It is hard to think that we could speak about knowledge without relating it to the world, and as hard to think knowledge without correspondence.

VI. Conclusion

As such, it seems that knowledge cannot be defined in a way that would fit our intuitions as long as truth remains undefined; also, the view on the possibility of defining truth (also keeping in tone with out intuitions) is pessimistic to say the least.

A final remark: as my results are entirely negative, something must be said about what remains to be done. Seeing, as I hope to have shown, that knowledge and truth, as they are normally conceived, cannot be reconciled, or even really talked about, I suggest that these analyses be shifted into more "unorthodox" territory – for example, virtue epistemology, or Williamson's (2002) 'knowledge-first' approach *etc*. For many of the recent approaches to truth and knowledge most of the problems I have talked about don't even appear. Or, maybe when we are tired of all of it, we can turn to some kind of deflationism, or some epistemic anti-realism.

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