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The Metaphysics of  
Knowledge

KEITH HOSSACK

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*In memory of my father,  
George B. Hossack.*

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## Preface

If a meaningful term is indefinable, it is said to be primitive. An example is the word 'not,' which everyone understands, but no one knows how to define. It is clear that if there is to be such a thing as a correct chain of definitions, then there must be primitive terms to terminate the chain. Therefore if any chain of definitions is correct, there exists a primitive term; if not, then every term is primitive. Thus there certainly exist primitive terms.

The thesis of this book is that 'knowledge' is a primitive term. The reason it is primitive is because the relation it names between a mind and a fact is a simple relation. Because knowledge is simple, it is unanalysable; there is nothing simpler than knowledge, in terms of which knowledge might be analysed, explained or defined. But knowledge is simpler than other things, which can be analysed in terms of it. The book's targets for such metaphysical analysis include the following: concepts, truth, necessity, consciousness, persons and language.

Perhaps not every simple relation deserves to be called fundamental. However, if a relation is simple, it seems plausible that it is at least a candidate for being metaphysically fundamental. For example, spatial betweenness is a simple relation. It is also metaphysically fundamental, for it picks out for us an important natural kind of particulars, namely the material beings. A particular is material, or a body, only if it is between some things; even if there were only one material particle in the whole universe, still it would be between itself and itself. Thus betweenness might be said to be the very essence of matter.

Is knowledge a metaphysically fundamental relation like betweenness? We can use the relation of knowledge to pick out an important natural kind of particulars, namely the mental beings. For an individual is mental or a mind only if it knows something: that which never knows anything is not a mind. Just as betweenness is the essence of matter, so knowledge is the essence of mind. This hypothesis echoes the claim of Descartes that extension is the essence of body and thought the essence of mind. But

it is not the same as Descartes' claim. In the first place, betweenness and knowledge are binary relations, whereas Descartes conceived of extension and thought as unary qualities. In the second place, Descartes had a doctrine that distinctness of essence entailed disjointness of kind; hence if the essence of Descartes' body is extension, and the essence of Descartes' mind is thought, then his body and his mind belong to disjoint kinds and hence are different things. Thus Descartes' claim about essence entailed his familiar substance dualism.

In contrast, the present hypothesis, that betweenness is the essence of the material and knowledge the essence of the mental, does not entail substance dualism. For it does not exclude the possibility of the same thing being at once material and mental. So it leaves it an open question whether matter can think, i.e., whether every material being and every mental being are distinct. The hypothesis that knowledge is the essence of mind is therefore consistent both with substance monism and with substance dualism about the material and the mental.

However, the hypothesis that knowledge is a simple relation is certainly a form of property dualism, or rather, of relation dualism. If knowledge is a simple relation, it is not constituted by any other properties or relations, so in particular it is not constituted by physical properties and relations. That might seem to threaten philosophical naturalism. It would certainly undermine the case for the following claim:

*Metaphysical Supervenience:* It is metaphysically necessary that two worlds that do not differ in any physical respect do not differ in any epistemic respect.

But we must distinguish materialism from philosophical naturalism. Materialism is the doctrine that every possible being is a material being, which does seem to require the truth of Metaphysical Supervenience. Philosophical naturalism, in contrast, is motivated only by the demand that everything that actually happens should have a complete natural explanation. Naturalism can therefore be content to require only the following weaker thesis:

*Nomological Supervenience:* It is nomologically necessary that two worlds that do not differ in any physical respect do not differ in any epistemic respect.

This weaker thesis, I shall argue, is perfectly consistent with the claim that knowledge is a simple non-physical relation. Thus I do not think that anything in the present book is plainly inconsistent with philosophical naturalism. On the other hand, so far as I can see, nothing in the book is inconsistent with substance dualism either.

The plan of the book is as follows. Chapter 1 expounds the central thesis that knowledge is a relation of a mind to a fact. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, so if knowledge is a simple relation, the task of epistemology cannot be the analysis of knowledge in terms of truth and warrant. Rather the task must be the study of warrant, taking the concept of knowledge for granted; as Williamson (2000) puts it, knowledge should be the ‘unexplained explainer’ in epistemology. Chapter 1 accordingly offers accounts of epistemic reliability, justification, warrant and defeasibility in terms of knowledge and its causation by mental acts.

The *relata* of the knowledge relation are minds and facts. Chapter 2 provides a theory of facts, according to which facts are combinations of particulars and universals. The relation of *combination*, which relates a fact and its constituents, is taken to be another simple and metaphysically fundamental relation. It is metaphysically fundamental, because it divides all beings into particulars and universals, and moreover it divides all particulars into individuals and facts. The chapter gives a theory of the combination relation, in terms of which we can speak of the structure of a fact. A theory of truth as correspondence to fact is presented; however, it turns out that if we are to avoid the Liar paradox, we cannot take the predicate ‘true’ to express a genuine property.

This result would be alarming if we wished to use *truth* as the centrally important theoretical primitive of the theory of content. But it is not alarming in the present context, for we can use knowledge instead of truth to found the theory of content. In Chapter 3 a knowledge-based account is developed, according to which a content is a mode of presentation of a fact (which fact, of course, need not exist). The account takes a content to be not an abstract object, but a property of a mental act. It is the property that determines the mental act’s cognitive value, which Frege calls its ‘value-for-the-getting-of-knowledge’ (*Erkenntniswert*). The chapter argues that a concept is not a part of a content; rather, it is the property of the mental subject that grounds the subject’s capacity to have the thoughts

which activate that concept. Given concepts, we can define reference, and hence truth, in terms of knowledge; the referent of a concept is that object knowledge of which is made possible by possession of the concept. A version of the picture theory of thought is now possible: a thought is a picture of a fact, in the sense that the thought is true if there is a fact that combines the referents of the concepts activated by the thought.

With the theory of modes of presentation in hand, Chapter 4 goes on to offer an epistemic account of necessity: a fact is necessary if it has an *a priori* mode of presentation, contingent otherwise. The chapter develops this account, which is just the doctrine of traditional rationalism. It then discusses what is currently taken to be the main obstacle to the rationalist doctrine, namely the existence of many supposed counterexamples to the coincidence of the necessary and the *a priori*. It examines these counterexamples, and argues that none of them is convincing. Finally it offers an account of the philosophical discourse of 'possible worlds' within an ontology that presupposes only knowledge and the one real world.

Chapter 5 applies the metaphysics of knowledge to the mind, the other *relatum* of the knowledge relation. The chapter discusses the problem of consciousness, and seeks to define consciousness in terms of knowledge. It says that a state is conscious if it instantiates a certain type of universal, namely a *quale*. *Qualia* are defined in terms of knowledge: one's knowing concerning one's experience that it has a certain *quale* is nothing over and above the experience itself; the experience, and one's knowledge of its instantiating the *quale* it does, are one and the same identical event. This Identity Thesis, which is adumbrated in Aristotle, was first explicitly stated by Thomas Reid. Brentano later gave a somewhat similar theory, but based his account on the concept of *appearance* rather than knowledge. The chapter argues that Brentano's account is inferior to Reid's, because only knowledge will do to define consciousness.

Chapter 6 continues the discussion of consciousness, and applies it to persons. Following Locke, the chapter argues that a person is a mind that can think of itself under the concept 'I'. Therefore a *person* can be defined in terms of knowledge, as a being that knows itself under that concept which is the intersection of a subjective and an objective mode of presentation of oneself. The subjective mode presents oneself as the subject of one's conscious states; the objective mode presents oneself as a psychological agent in the sense of functionalism, and as part of the objective order.

Persons desire to communicate, and Chapter 7 uses knowledge to give a metaphysics of language. The chapter begins by indicating how, using the apparatus of contents and concepts introduced in Chapter 3, we can go on to give a semantic theory for a language. It then proposes that understanding a language consists in one's capacity, on hearing a sentence of the language, to be the subject of a characteristic mental act whose content is the same as that of the heard sentence. In the right context, one's being the subject of this mental act causes one to know the fact of which the sentence's content is a mode of presentation. This is the mechanism of knowledge transmission by testimony: a sentence is an artefact for the production of the characteristic mental acts whereby testimony is transmitted, and a community's language is their collection of such artefacts.

Finally, Chapter 8 returns to the question of whether knowledge really is a simple and fundamental relation. An alternative hypothesis is the following Constitutive Thesis:

To know that *A* is nothing over and above believing that *A* in the right circumstances.

The chapter examines arguments for and against the Constitutive Thesis. The arguments in its favour are mostly causal: beliefs and other psychological states, or the physical states that realise them, are the complete causes of our actions, so if knowledge is not to be epiphenomenal, it must be identical with belief. It is suggested that these arguments fail: the causal efficacy of knowledge is fully compatible with the completeness of physics, even if knowledge is not identical to any physical state. The chapter goes on to suggest that the Constitutive Thesis has troubles of its own in dealing with consciousness and the unity of the self.

To the extent that the arguments given in the book succeed, they suggest that the concept of knowledge is a theoretically fruitful one, in terms of which many other concepts can be analysed. Therefore we should not take knowledge to be an unscientific concept, useful only in practical life but of no theoretical value. Nor should we take knowledge to be definable in other terms, for example, as some kind of justified true belief. We should take the concept of knowledge to be primitive; and the thing itself to be metaphysically fundamental.

I have to thank many people for invaluable help while I was writing this book. The members of my graduate seminar over several years gave



me much useful instruction, corrected many of my errors, and forced me to think more clearly about many issues. I was also greatly helped by comments from the group of London philosophers to which I belong, who meet weekly at King's to discuss each other's work. I am grateful too for comments from King's colleagues in our departmental research seminar, and from comments from many other philosophers at talks and conferences.

So many people have helped me that I cannot possibly mention them all by name. However, there are some that I must thank individually. My greatest debt, both intellectually and personally, is to my friend Mark Sainsbury, who spurred me on, sometimes with help and encouragement, sometimes with challenging criticisms. I have also to thank Andrew Jack, my former colleague, and Fraser MacBride, my former student and now a London colleague at Birkbeck. These two friends have had an immense influence on me: I learned from Andrew the importance of the problem of psychophysical causation, and from Fraser the importance of the topic of universals. I thank too my friends David Galloway and Mark Textor for detailed criticism and discussion of several drafts of this material; I am much indebted to these two good colleagues and good comrades.

My academic career has been spent entirely here in the philosophy department at King's College London, where I have been very happy. The department has a fine reputation for the way it succeeds in combining an atmosphere of amity with intellectual rigour in discussion. I am very grateful to all my King's colleagues for all their help. I should like to thank in particular Jim Hopkins, Chris Hughes, MM McCabe, David Papineau and especially Gabe Segal, who was a tolerant and supportive Chair while I was writing the book.

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*K. G. H.*

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Chapter 5 contains material an earlier version of which appeared in ‘Self-Knowledge and Consciousness’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 102 (2002): 163–81. An earlier version of other material from this chapter appeared in ‘Consciousness in act and action’, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 2 (2003): 187–203. (Copyright Kluwer Academic Publishers; with kind permission of Springer Science and Business Media.)

Chapter 6 is largely reprinted from ‘Vagueness and Personal Identity’ in F. MacBride (ed.) *Identity & Modality: New Essays in Metaphysics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006), 221–41.

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# 1

## ‘S knows that *A*’

What is the relation between knowledge and belief? It seems evident that we often know by believing, but the word ‘by’ is ambiguous between a constitutive sense and a causal sense. Someone may marry by saying ‘I do,’ which is the constitutive sense of ‘by’. A stone may break a window by striking it, which is the causal sense of ‘by’. Now, when we know by believing, is that the constitutive sense of ‘by’, or is it the causal sense?

There is a long philosophical tradition of trying to analyse knowledge in terms of belief. For example, according to the ‘tripartite analysis’, knowledge is justified true belief. If that were correct, knowledge would be a kind of belief, and the relation between knowledge and belief would be constitutive. When the tripartite analysis was decisively refuted by Gettier’s (1963) counterexamples, many people sought to repair the analysis by complicating it. But an alternative conclusion to draw from Gettier is that knowledge is not a kind of belief at all. On this view, the relation between knowledge and belief is not constitutive but causal; an intrinsic state that realises a belief can cause knowledge, but the belief and the knowledge are two distinct things. It is this causal point of view that is recommended in this book. I make no attempt here to analyse knowledge as a kind of belief, or as anything else; instead I take the concept of knowledge to be primitive, and the relation of knowledge to be metaphysically fundamental.

Belief and experience are traditionally thought of as propositional attitudes, i.e., as psychological relations to a content. If knowledge were a kind of belief, then knowledge would be a propositional attitude too. But if belief causes knowledge rather than constituting it, the way is open for a conception of knowledge that does not regard it as a propositional attitude. We can instead take knowledge to be a relation to a fact rather than a content.

On this alternative conception, our human epistemic faculties are powers of the mind to cause itself to know. When we become aware of a fact, typically it is because the fact caused a faculty to cause a mental act with a certain content; if the faculty is working correctly, and the context is favourable, the mental act causes the mind to know the fact. On this conception, an English knowledge attribution with a ‘that’ clause is not a propositional attitude report; rather, it gives the content of the mental act that caused the knowledge.

If we adopt the hypothesis that there is nothing more fundamental than knowledge, then instead of trying to analyse knowledge in terms of other things, we do better to analyse other things in terms of knowledge. In the present chapter I discuss epistemology, a subject whose project some have seen as the definition of knowledge in terms of such notions as justification, warrant and reliability. Here I reverse that order of explanation, and instead seek definitions of justification, warrant and reliability in terms of knowledge.

Justification, in the sense of epistemic faultlessness, can be defined as follows: one is justified if one has reasoned correctly, i.e., if one has been the subject of a sequence of mental acts which in a favourable context would cause knowledge. In this sense even the brain in a vat is justified in its opinions, for in a more favourable context the brain’s ruminations would indeed give it knowledge of the external world—it is guilty of no irrationality. But the opinions of the brain are not warranted, for however conscientiously it reasons, it never gets any closer to the truth. Even if all its beliefs did chance to be true, still they are not reliably true, and so they are not warranted. Reliability can be defined in terms of knowledge; *S* is reliable about *A* on condition that if *S* were to have the true belief that *A*, then *S* would know that *A*. Warrant can then be defined as the property that underlies epistemic reliability, i.e., as the disposition to know if one believes.

The plan of this chapter is as follows. Section 1 argues that knowledge is not a propositional attitude. Section 2 classifies knowledge as a relation between a mind and a fact. Section 3 discusses whether the connection between knowledge and mental acts is causal or constitutive. Section 4 discusses epistemic faculties, and section 5 defeaters. Section 6 discusses some unsuccessful attempts to define reliability. Section 7 defines reliability as knowing if one believes, and warrant as being disposed to know if

one believes; section 8 concludes that explaining other things in terms of knowledge can be a fruitful strategy.

### 1.1 Is Knowledge a Propositional Attitude?

A knowledge attribution in English is a sentence that attributes knowledge to someone. Typically it will have the grammatical form ‘S knows that *A*’. That is grammatically similar to the belief attribution ‘S believes that *A*’ and to the desire attribution ‘S desires that *A*’. The grammatical similarity makes it natural to assume that knowledge attributions share a common logical form with belief attributions and desire attributions. Since belief and desire are propositional attitudes, it would follow that knowledge is a propositional attitude too. But I shall suggest that this natural assumption is mistaken, and that the grammatical similarity is more apparent than real.

A propositional attitude has relational logical form. For example, if Pharaoh believes that Hesperus is shining, then the logical form is *Rab*, where *R* is the *belief* relation, *a* is Pharaoh, and *b* is the entity named by the phrase ‘that Hesperus is shining’. But what is the entity named by this phrase? Certainly it cannot be the fact that Hesperus is shining. For Pharaoh may believe that Hesperus is shining and be mistaken, since he is fallible on such matters. But then he does not have the belief in virtue of standing in the belief relation to the fact that Hesperus is shining, since that fact does not exist.

Thus if belief is a relation to anything, it is not a relation to a fact. What then can it be a relation to? One suggestion is that it is a relation to a *proposition*. A proposition is a hypothetical entity characterised by its postulated capacity to be true or false; it is true upon a certain condition, and false otherwise. For example, the proposition *that Hesperus is shining* is true on condition that Hesperus is shining. We may therefore define the constituents of a proposition as the sequence of entities that enter its truth condition. For example, the proposition *that Hesperus is shining* will have as its constituents the planet Venus and the property of *shining*. We may define identity of propositions by identity of constituents: if *x* and *y* are propositions, then  $x = y$  only if the constituents of *x* are  $x_1, \dots, x_n$ , the constituents of *y* are  $y_1, \dots, y_n$ , and  $x_1 = y_1, x_2 = y_2, \dots$  and  $x_n = y_n$ .

It is evident that propositions so defined cannot be the *relata* of the belief relation. For the proposition that Hesperus is shining and the proposition that Phosphorus is shining are the same proposition by our criterion, since each has as its two constituents the property of *shining* and the planet Venus. Yet Pharaoh, who lived before it was known that Hesperus is Phosphorus, may believe that Hesperus is shining but not believe that Phosphorus is shining. Since the propositions are the same and the beliefs different, it follows that belief is not a relation to a proposition.

Since the main purpose of propositions is to serve as the objects of belief, and since unassisted they are inadequate for that purpose, we might be inclined to reject the hypothesis that there are such things as propositions. But we need not yet reject the theory that belief is an attitude, i.e., a diadic relation between a mind and a content. The content must however be some entity that is finer-grained than a proposition, so as to differentiate believing that Hesperus is shining from believing that Phosphorus is shining.

What then is a content? It might be suggested that we could identify the content of the sentence 'Hesperus is shining' with the inferential role of the belief it expresses. But the notion of an inferential role is ambiguous. On one disambiguation, the inferential role is a functional role, specified descriptively by the way human beings do in fact reason. On a different disambiguation, it is specified normatively, by the way human beings ought to reason, if they wish to conform their beliefs to the facts. It is the normative disambiguation that is required here, for beliefs are often the premisses of inferences, and for logical purposes what we are concerned with is the rational correctness of the inference, not the psychological normality of the human being making the inference.

On the normative conception of content, we can say to a first approximation that the content of *A* is equal to the content of *B* if it is impossible coherently to believe *A* and disbelieve *B*. This is Evans' 'Intuitive Criterion of Difference' (1982: 18–19). By 'coherently', Evans means rationally: but what is rationality? It must be more than mere conformity of one's beliefs to the facts, for beliefs can be true by chance, whereas rationality is a matter of reliable conformity to the facts. The reliability in question is clearly epistemic, so we may conclude that a way of forming beliefs is rational only if it is a way of possibly getting knowledge. Thus Evans' criterion by its mention of irrationality implicitly relies on the concept of knowledge.

Rational correctness cannot be defined in terms of any non-epistemic notion. For example, rational correctness is not the modal validity of one's reasoning, as the following inference shows:

Hesperus shines.  
Therefore, Phosphorus shines.

This inference is valid in the modal sense, for it is impossible for its premiss to be true and its conclusion false. But it is not rationally correct: someone who did not know that Hesperus is Phosphorus would not be justified in inferring its conclusion from its premiss. It may be suggested that what is wrong with the inference is that it is not logically valid, where 'logical validity' is the property an argument has if its conclusion is true on every interpretation on which its premisses are true. But rational correctness is not logical validity either, as the following inference shows:

Your nag kicked my steed.  
Therefore, your horse kicked my horse.

This is not logically valid, since the conclusion is not true upon every interpretation on which its premisses are true. But it is rationally correct, for the terms 'nag', 'steed' and 'horse' differ only in Fregean tone.

It therefore appears that rational correctness must be defined in terms of knowledge: an inference is rationally correct only if it is possible by its means to pass from knowledge of the premisses to knowledge of the conclusion. The 'irrationality' of which Evans speaks can then be defined in terms of obvious rational correctness: one cannot without irrationality believe *A*, and disbelieve *B*, if there is an obvious rationally correct inference from *A* to *B*. So interpreted, Evans' criterion tells us that 'Hesperus shines' and 'Phosphorus shines' have different contents, since there is no obvious rationally correct inference from the one to the other. But 'Your nag kicked my steed' and 'Your horse kicked my horse' differ only in tone: they have the same content, for there is a trivially rationally correct inference from the one to the other. Thus contents are individuated in terms of knowledge. If belief must be explained as a relation to a content, and if the individuation of contents must be explained in terms of knowledge, then it looks as if belief must be explained in terms of knowledge, and not the other way round.



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