

Alternative Normative Concepts

- We have spent the first half of the semester worrying about our claims to knowledge, justification, and so forth -- even our claim to knowledge etc. about these very claims!
- We have been humble, recognizing the possibility that our beliefs about “first-order” matters are systematically false, and indeed that our beliefs about those beliefs are too.
- Suppose, however, that we could convince ourselves that our claims to knowledge, justification, and so on stand up to critical scrutiny. We know what we claim to know, are justified in believing what we think we are, etc. Would that shut the door on skepticism?
- There is a case to be made that it would not. There is a hard-to-describe -- maybe *ineffable* -- worry that can still be raised (or gestured at), and it is not clear how to discharge it. It is related to Alston’s ‘anti-objectivism’ about normative terms. However, unlike Alston’s worry, this one is – arguably – independent of natural language semantics. (‘Arguably’ because Eklund himself is optimistic that there is a metasemantic solution.)
 - *Note:* The worry actually concerns *all* normative concepts, not just epistemological ones. But we will focus on its application to epistemology.

Realism and Objectivity

- One way to think about the problem is by way of the following question. What would it be for us to be *really right* about knowledge, justification, evidence, reason, and so on?
- A natural answer is that it would be for our beliefs about these things to be *true*, and true *independent* of human convention, just like the moral realist thinks our moral beliefs are.
- *Note:* Obviously the fact that the *linguistic item*, e.g., “Jones has knowledge” is not true independent of human convention, since the fact that it means *that Jones has knowledge* depends on the conventions of the English language. What we hope is that *the fact that Jones has knowledge* -- *not* that “Jones has knowledge” expresses it -- is so independent.

- But Eklund argues that this is not good enough. Imagine a different linguistic community who uses the words “knowledge”, “justification”, and so on much as we do, but, for them, “knowledge” refers to knowledge*, “justification” refers to justification*, and so forth, where many states count as knowledge, but not knowledge*, and vice versa.
- Let us add that the alternative community is *just as reliable about knowledge*, justification*, etc. as we are about knowledge, justification, etc.* In fact, we agree with them about what counts as “knowledge”, “justification”, and so on *in their sense*, and they agree on what counts as “knowledge”, “justification”, and so on *in our sense*.
- While the standard conditions for realism about knowledge, justification, etc. are met, there is a sense in which there is no objective fact as to who is right, unless more is said.¹
- But if we are *really right*, then surely there is such a fact! Even if our beliefs are all independently true, we think -- something like! -- that we are right about the *right things*.

Elusive Questions

- What could *that* mean? We might say that it means that what we call “knowledge”, “justification”, and so forth *really is* knowledge, justification and so forth. But that is trivial! That’s just a special case of the fact that ‘F-ness’ refers to F-ness in our language! Instances of the same schema are no less true out of the alternative community’s mouths.
- A different proposal would resemble the standard response to Goodman’s New Riddle of Induction. That response, recall, depends on a distinction between *natural kinds* and gerrymandered kinds. Although it is *true* that all emeralds observed to date have been grue, as well as green, green-ness is a natural kind, while grue-ness is not. So, only induction on the former is justified. Perhaps, in a similar way, the sense in which we are really right is that we have independently true beliefs about the epistemic *natural kinds*.
- *Problem*: Either “natural kind” is *itself* a normative term or not. If it is not, then it is hard to see how this shows that the alternative community has made a *mistake*. We might as well say that they have true beliefs about the Gs, while we have true beliefs about the Hs. Who cares? On the other hand, if “natural kind” *is* a normative term, then the problem

¹ For an analysis of the relevant sense of ‘objective’, see Clarke-Doane, *Morality and Mathematics*, Sec. 1.6.

iterates. For we can add that the alternative community has independently true beliefs about the *natural kinds**. They *are* making a mistake. But we are making a mistake*!

- A third proposal would be that what is at issue between us and the alternative community is an *ineffable fact*. The sense in which we are really right cannot strictly be stated.
- *Problem*: We had better be able to *mention* (i.e., name or quantify over) the ineffable truth if the proposal is intelligible. But, then, letting P name it, we can say that P is true!
- A fourth reaction would be to say that we have a *non-factual* dispute with the alternative community, similar to a dispute over what appetizers to order, or what team to root for.
- *Problem*: We started out wanting to say that we were *really right*. But we're not really right to order the breadsticks! So, *if* we're really right, *then* it cannot be a matter of this.

No Intelligible Question

- We started out saying that an alternative community could use the words “justification”, “knowledge”, etc. *much like us* while being reliable detectors of justification*, knowledge*, and so forth. Given this possibility, we are now stuck trying to explain what could be at issue between us and that community, assuming that one of us is really right.
- But maybe we were too quick to grant the possibility in question. What, after all, does “much like us” mean here? Maybe the *meaning* of “knowledge”, “justification”, and so forth is fully determined by their *practical roles*, so that an alternative community using these terms for the same purposes as us would actually be referring to the same things.
- *Problem*: On many contemporary theories of reference -- e.g., causal or descriptive theories -- the scenario in question *is* possible, and maybe even actual. So, if it is not possible, some alternative theory of reference must be true, and it's unclear what it is.
- *Deeper Problem*: Even if the scenario is impossible, it seems clear that it could “turn out” to be actual in the sense that Hesperus could “turn out” to fail to be identical with Phosphorus. But, if so, then a related problem arises: under the assumption that there is knowledge* as well as knowledge, justification* as well as justification, and so forth, which “should” we seek to realize (scare quotes because “should” is a normative term)?

Deflation

- There is, thus, a case to be made that the skeptical problem we started with, or something much like it, is real -- however hard it may be to articulate. Should we therefore give up on the idea that, in the scenario in question, one of us is really right and one of us is not?
- This is hard to stomach. For any first-order disagreement over a normative proposition, P, we can “translate” that disagreement into a “disagreement” between two communities as to whether P or P*, where P* is, intuitively, the translation of $\sim P$ into a true distinct proposition about a slightly different subject matter. Moreover, *the practical ramifications of the disputes are identical*. So, if the alternative community thinks that they should* believe that the next emerald will be grue, they will believe that -- exactly as if they thought that they should believe it. Although we do not deny any truths that the alternative community affirms, or vice versa, it is *for all practical purposes* as if we did.