Almeder's Unknowable Defeater Defeated

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by
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Robert Almeder has argued[1] that three "fourth conditions" for nondefectiveness of knowledge justification claims, proposed in the recent literature,[2] are essentially similar, require modification in order to eliminate the possibility of an unknowable defeater, and, so modified, render attainment of non-basic factual knowledge impossible. Although I believe there are objections to be raised against his exposition and reduction of the three proposed fourth conditions, I wish only to raise some doubts about the supposed necessity of the modifications and then to argue against his claim that, so modified, the result is too stringent.

Almeder wants to insist that the analysis of 'X knows that p', given in the following four conditions, fails:

1) p is true;
2) X believes that p;
3) X is justified in believing that p;
4. There is no true sentence which, if added to the
   sentences expressing X's justification for believing that p, would defeat that justification.

Almeder has us imagine a situation in which the first three conditions are satisfied and in which, additionally, there is some insurmountable barrier to any person's knowing that this defeating sentence is true. He maintains that we would not acknowledge that, given such a barrier, a person does not have knowledge of what he professes to know: "As Austin says, it is outrageous to say that he might not know what he professes to know unless we have some definite lack in mind and which we are prepared to specify upon being pressed." (*Ibid*, p. 242) He grants that any defeater must, under the proposed fourth condition, be intelligible, capable of being thought, and such that its truth is knowable in principle; but he argues that, in addition, its truth must be "humanly knowable"—i.e., the sentence must be such that there is no special reason preventing its truth   From ever being known. God's effective degree, then, must function so as both to leave the truth of the sentence knowable in principle and yet render it unknowable n fact.

The difficulty I have here is with Almeder's understanding and application of the distinction between something knowable in principle but not in fact, and something not knowable in principle. What I do not understand is how he can regard as knowable principle something which God, a Being supposedly powerful enough to enforce his prohibitions, decrees that no man shall ever know. Almeder's mixture of modal and factual characterizations in of no help; he doesn't want to equate being unknowable with never known (for obvious reasons), but he also wants to avoid equating his sense of unknowable with being in principle unknowable, presumably because a sentence whose truth is in principle unknowable either fails some (unstated) criterion of cognitive meaningfulness or has no epistemological relevance, and thus could not defeat any justification to which it was added. But how is it that a sentence that is unknowable because of some special

reason can escape the same difficulties? Neither the truth of the justification for believing *p*, nor of *p* itself, confirms or disconfirms such a sentence (for, if any sentence whose truth we know or can know were to render some other statement more of less likely than its denial, I am supposing, the latter would be knowable—there could be evidence for or against it). In sum, it is difficult to see how Almeder has identified a set of potential defeaters by talking about sentences which are in principle knowable but which, because of some effective divine decree, can never be known.

But let us suppose that there is the possibility of an unknowable defeater and see what results. In the face of this possibility, suppose the fourth condition is revised so that a necessary condition for a sentence to be a defeater is that it must be "humanly knowable," i.e., such that "there is no special reason preventing it from ever in fact being known." (from Almeder's original address) This is a revision in the fourth condition in that it specifies further criteria for defeaters; besides being a true sentence which, if added to a justification, defeats it, a defeater must also be humanly knowable. Nothing that fails to fit all of the criteria will count as a defeater. As we shall shortly see, it makes no great difference whether we regard Almeder's admonition that any defeater must be "humanly knowable" as an explicit statement and clarification of something implicit in the notion of defeasibility, or as a necessary revision of the concept.

At this point in the paper, Almeder makes his critical move.

> But it will not help to incorporate this requirement into the proposed conditions of non-defectiveness because . . . there cannot be no unknowable defeater of a justification unless the justification is an *entailing* one . . . . And just in case the justification is *non-entailing* it will be logically possible that there is an unknowable defeater . . . . [A]s long as it is logically possible that there be an unknowable defeater, a person's justification can be defective under the proposed condition even though it be possible that he knows what he claims to know. (p. 242)

Almeder's argument here is most puzzling. The last sentence of this quotation is correct, but it expresses the reason for clarifying or revising the notion of defeasibility in the fourth condition. It was this clarification of the concept of a defeater, or revision of the criteria for its application, which was to serve to rule out any unknowable sentence from counting as a defeater (just as the fourth condition prevents any false sentence, or anything other than a sentence, from counting as a defeater). Thus, it is not necessary that the justification be an entailing one in order to rule out there being unknowable defeaters, once the proposed understanding or revision of the fourth condition is accepted. Almeder's argument, then, actually supports the revision rather than undermining it.

What an entailing justification would do is to let a person eliminate the possibility that there is a true, knowable defeater that doesn't happen to be known. This would have the effect of enabling that person to establish conclusively that the fourth condition is satisfied. But nothing in either our ordinary understanding of knowledge claims, nor in the proposed analysis of knowledge as indefeasibly justified true belief, requires that a person determine that the fourth condition is satisfied for him to know what he claims to know. If the fourth condition is satisfied along with the first three, then *X* knows that *p*, whether he knows that the fourth condition is satisfied or not. And if the fourth condition is not satisfied, than even given the first three conditions, it is not the case that *X* knows that *p*. Having a

condition that one may not know independently to be satisfied isn't a new feature of this type of analysis, For example, if we were to require that one *know* that condition one is satisfied, that is, know that *p* is true, in order for condition one to *be* satisfied, we would have a circular analysis: *X* knows that *p* only if *X* knows that *p* is true. It is evident that we need not accept the requirement that one must know for each condition of knowledge that it is satisfied, for that would render all but the first condition unnecessary. Further, any argument that, in order for the fourth condition to be satisfied one must know that it is satisfied, would make the truth of the statement 'The fourth condition is satisfied' dependent upon its being known to be true. And surely this is plausible, if at all, only in the context of basic statements. Finally, whether, for example, the first condition is satisfied is no more accessible to *X* than whether the fourth condition is satisfied; yet surely Almeder wouldn't insist that the inclusion of the first condition in a set of criteria transforms the justification requirement into an entailing one. What, then, can his criticism that this is the effect of including the fourth condition in the set be based upon?

It seems, the, that in cases where the first three conditions are satisfied, the satisfaction of the fourth condition gives justified, indefeasible true belief; whereas the non-satisfaction of the fourth condition gives justified but defeasible true belief. Only the former, the proponents of the fourth condition claim, deserves to be called knowledge, because one's justification for a belief cannot be overturned by his coming to believe any true statement. On the other hand, they are unwilling to bestow the honorific 'knowledge' in a situation in which one's justification for his belief is vulnerable to the effects of adding some true sentence to it. Hence, what is required for knowledge is belief which is true and which is based on justifications not defeasible by any true statements, or indefeasible justifications; the typical counterexamples, they argue, only apply to belief which is true but based on defeasible justifications. Since Almeder's argument against the revised fourth condition turns only upon the illicit supposition that in order for that condition to be satisfied, the justification must be an entailing one, the fourth condition emerges from his critical remarks only slightly changed and otherwise unscathed.

In the last part of his paper, Almeder suggests that there is a sense of knowing which can be specified so as to apply legitimately to non-basic factual knowledge claims, yet which is not subject to counterexample. I still think that this is right; originally I thought that the classic analysis of knowledge as justified true belief was that sense. The difficulty in current discussions seems to lie in the misunderstanding people have had of 'justified,' as argued by Meyers and Stern.[3] Such misunderstanding emerged in the counterexamples in one or both of two forms—either in viewing justification as transitive, or in viewing the truth of justifying claims as irrelevant to their ability to justify. For Gettier[4]-type counterexamples, the fourth condition is unnecessary.

The counterexamples frequently go something like this. Jones believes the false sentence *s* on the basis of *r*, where his belief in *s* on *r* is justified. But the false sentence *s* entails the true sentence *t*; and Jones, perceiving this entailment, believes the true proposition *t* on the basis of *s*. But, since *r* justifies his belief in *s*, and *s* entails *t*, *r* justifies his belief in *t*. Since *t* is true, and Jones believes *t* and is justified in believing *t* by *r*, Jones has a justified true belief that *t*. But we wouldn't want to say that Jones knows that *t*. Hence, justified true belief isn't knowledge. Proponents of the fourth condition want to maintain that its inclusion in the criteria for knowledge and its satisfaction is necessary and sufficient to take care of this sort of counter-example. For, if Jones had added to his

justification the true sentence 's is false,' that would defeat his justification for believing *t*. However that is so only if Jones doesn't regard *t* as evident on *r*, which is to say, doesn't regard his belief in *t* as justified by *r simpliciter*.

Consider that equally classic situation where I believe that all crows are black on the basis that all the crows I've ever seen are black. Let us suppose that this belief, that all crows are black, is justified by my evidence but false. Suppose further that I believe the true sentence that the next crow I see will be black. If I learn that my belief that all crows are black is false, will that undermine my justification for my belief that the next crow I see will be black? That depends on whether I take that false belief that all crows are black to be (part of) my justification for believing that the next crow I see will be black, or not. If I do, then my belief that the next crow that I see will be black, although true, isn't justified. If I don't, that is, if my belief that 'The next crow that I see will be black' is based on the fact that every crow that I have ever seen was black, and not on my belief that all crows are black, then its becoming evident to me that it is false that all crows are black won't shake the justification of my belief that the next crow I see will be black. Hence, I know that the next crow I see will be black because my belief that that is so is justified and true; I do not know that all crows are black because my belief in that, though justified, is false. If my reasons for believing that the next crow that I see will be black were to include the false sentence that all crows are black—that is, if the former belief were really based on the latter—the belief that the next crow I see will be black, though true, wouldn't be justified, not because there is some true proposition which, when added to my reasons for believing it, will make it no longer evident to me, but because my reasons for believing that the next crow I see will be black are not all true. I am, put generally, endorsing the position that 'my belief that *p* justifies my belief that *q*,' while it doesn't entail that *q* is true, does entail that *p* is true, and, that where *p* justifies *q* and *q* entails r, it doesn't follow that *p* justifies *r*. Meyers and Stern distinguish between justification and well-takenness where the latter involves inference from evidence according to established epistemic methods. But well-takenness doesn't entail justification. But if this is so, then the analysis of knowledge as justified, true belief (i.e., in terms of the three conditions) is not shown defective by any of the counterexamples involving an inference through a false sentence. Hence, the fourth condition is unnecessary to handle those counterexamples, precisely because a proper understanding of the second condition eliminates them.

However, unless we attach Swain's description of his TNT counterexample and hold that it doesn't involve a reasonably decent justification, the foregoing does not seem to answer it. For, Swain specifically avoids having Smith draw any false, intermediate conclusions in reasoning to the true belief that the TNT will explode. As Swain says:

> . . . Smith's justification is defective. But, we may suppose, his reasoning did not involve any false premises. Smith might have reasoned that the battery was powerful enough and hence the TNT would explode. But he did not reason in that way, and his justification is still sufficiently good to render it evident for him that the TNT would explode.[5]

It is defective because there is a true statement such that if it were put in conjunction with Smith's evidence it would render it no longer evident to him that the TNT would explode.

So, it appears that the fourth condition is required to take care of this type of

counterexample, where (a) there is no false step in the reasoning, and (b) the belief arrived at is defeasible by some true, knowable proposition. But the important thing to note is that its inclusion does not render it necessary that justification be entailing in order to constitute knowledge.

A last observation. It seems unlikely that the fourth condition will ultimately be shown unnecessary, because presupposed in the third. The reason for this, I think, lies in our intuition that the second and third conditions must be known to *X* to be satisfied in order for it to be true that *X* knows that *p*. That is, I think we would be unwilling to say that *X* knows that *p* if *X* doesn't know that he believes that *p*. Similarly, I think that we would be unwilling to say that *X* knows that *p* if he doesn't know that he is justified in his belief that *p*. To misquote Austin, it would be outrageous to say that he knows what he claims to know, if he doesn't know that he believes it and doesn't know that he is justified in believing it.[6]

But if this is so, then surely it would be too strong to insist that Jones, in knowing that he is justified in believing *p*, also knows that there is no true sentence which, if added to his justification, would defeat it—a point I argued for earlier against Almeder. For, if this were required, Almeder would be right: the only way for *X* to ensure that there is no defeater would be for *X*'s justification to entail *p*. But if the notion of justification were so explicated as to incorporate the fourth condition into the third, that would render the third condition such that *X* could not know it to be satisfied. And, it seems evident that the third condition must be known to be satisfied in order for *X* to know that *p*. I conclude that the fourth condition, in its revised form, is here to stay.

1. Robert Almeder, "Defeasibility, Scepticism, and the Unknowable Defeater," presented at the Western Division Meeting of The American Philosophical Association in Chicago, April 28, 1973. A version of this paper was published as "Defeasibility and Scepticism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 51 (December 1973): 238-244.

2. Keith Lehrer, "A Fourth Condition of Knowledge: A Defense," *The Review of Metaphysics* 24(September 1970): 122-128; Peter Klein, "A Proposed Definition of Propositional Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68(August 19, 1971): 471-482; Marshall Swain, "Knowledge, Causality and Justification," *The Journal of Philosophy* 69(June 1, 1972): 291-300.

3. Robert Meyers and Kenneth Stern, "Knowledge Without Paradox," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 70(March 22, 1973): 147-160.

4. Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23(June, 1963), pp. 121-124.

5. Marshall Swain, "An Alternative Analysis of Knowing," *Synthese* 23(4) (1972): 430.

6. See Meyers and Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-156, especially nn 17, 18.