On Never Knowing the Definition of Knowledge

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show that although there may be a correct definition of knowledge – that there is a correct definition of knowledge is, and need not be, asserted or denied for the purpose of the argument here – we could never know that we had the correct definition of knowledge. This is because in order to know that a definition of knowledge is correct we would have to already be in possession of a correct understanding of what knowledge is, otherwise we could not be in position to say that we *know* a definition of knowledge is correct. Clearly any proposed definition cannot be used to affirm its own correctness on pain of vicious justificatory circularity. In that case we would have to call upon a non-definitional account of what knowledge is. The problem then is that there is no agreed non-definitional account of knowledge and such accounts may be incompatible with each other. Indeed to undercut the vagueness and variety of non-definitional accounts of knowledge, to settle what is knowledge and what is not knowledge, was the point of aiming at a once-and-for-all definition. But that just takes us back to the problem of using a definition to affirm its own correctness. What remains the case is that we do not have an agreed understanding of what knowledge is and therefore we cannot be in a position to know that we have ever have a correct definition of knowledge even if we have it.

Consider K

K is a proposed definition of knowledge. By this is meant a real definition, not a stipulative or lexical definition. If K is correct, all and only things that fall under the definition are knowledge. If something fits the definition it is knowledge, and if something does not fit the definition it is not knowledge. Such definitions are usually formed up as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. There is no commitment here, nor need there be, as to whether knowledge is or is not definable. The question of whether knowledge is 'luminous' is irrelevant.[1] Rather it is supposed for the sake of argument that knowledge is definable.

Testing definitions for correctness

As the argument here generally refers to all possible definitions of knowledge, therefore giving a particular example of a definition of knowledge would be inappropriate and beside the point. But we can illustrate the general mechanism of how one might determine whether a definition K is correct or not as a definition of knowledge. Definitions, such as that for

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[1] See on this (Williamson, 2000). And in a different way (Cook Wilson, 1926, p.39-40). Also (Zagzebski, 1994).

knowledge, are usually couched in a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Thus K=abc, where each condition a, b, and c is necessary and they are jointly sufficient. This means respectively that there can be no instance of knowledge that does not have the feature a or b or c, and anything that has together the features abc *is* knowledge. This gives a way of testing whether a definition is correct. If we find an instance of knowledge that does not have any one or more of the features a or b or c, then the definition has failed to provide the necessary conditions for knowledge. If we find an instance of something that is not knowledge but has all the features abc, then the definition has failed to provide the sufficient conditions for knowledge. But here you can see the problem immediately: how are we to *know* that instances we pick out to test the definition are respectively instances of knowledge and not knowledge. Without knowing that, we cannot know whether the definition of knowledge K in question is correct or has failed.

Being in a position to know whether a definition of knowledge is correct

But what is it for us to be in the position where we may say that the definition K is correct or incorrect? Surely the only position where this may be the case is when we know the definition is correct or incorrect. This is not to say the definition cannot be correct or incorrect without our knowing it to be so. But what use could that be to us? Without knowing that the definition is correct it cannot justifiable and reasonable count for us as a definition of knowledge regardless of whether it is correct or not. To say that we may nevertheless treat it as the correct definition of knowledge would be an arbitrary gamble. How is it possible for us to know whether the definition of knowledge is the correct definition of knowledge?[2]

Using the definition

One way would be to see whether we know it to be the correct definition of knowledge according to the definition of knowledge K. But this would be hopelessly justificatorly circular whereby we say we know K is correct by checking that knowledge of K's correctness accords with knowing as defined by K.

Using another definition

If we cannot know that K is correct by checking the definition according to K, then we must, in order to do so, know what knowledge is independently of K.

This could be according to another definition of knowledge K1. But this would get us nowhere as far as knowing whether K is correct as it would start an infinite regress of definitions and our knowing that K is correct according to K1, and K1 is correct according to K2, and so on. It also supposes that there may be more than one definition of knowledge, and then if they were not logically identical, there would have to be some way of overarchingly deciding what knowledge really was out of all the possible definitions, which would return us to a singular definition. So we have to suppose that there is some K that is the unique definition of knowledge.

Non-definitional understanding of knowledge

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[2] In a general paper on definitions, I generalize problems with knowing if definitions are correct or not. But the case of the definition of knowledge itself presents additional difficulties because of logical self-reference. See (Shand, 2008).

If our knowing that K is correct cannot be derived from any definition of knowledge, including that given by K, it must be the case, if we are to know K is correct at all, we would have to know what knowledge is in some non-definitional way. But what could this amount to? What would knowing what knowledge is in a way that does not appeal to a definition amount to? On a purely practical utility level of pointlessness, it is hard to understand what the value of trying to define knowledge is if we already know all and only the things that count as knowledge, that is what knowledge is, by some means other than consulting a definition.

It certainly seems that people do seem to suppose that they know what knowledge is without consulting a definition of it, otherwise how would the definition ever be assessed or tested? When a definition is proposed it is usually assessed on the basis of examples and counterexamples compared to the necessary and sufficient conditions comprising the definition. But in order to be used validly as examples and counterexamples, by which means we might know that the definition of knowledge K is correct or not, we would have to know that they were examples of knowledge and counterexamples of not-knowledge. We have already seen on pain of circularity that the definition cannot help us with that. Yet the common parlance is: here is a proposed definition of knowledge K, but it cannot be a correct definition of knowledge as something K counts as knowledge is 'obviously' or 'clearly' not knowledge, or alternatively something that 'obviously' or 'clearly' is knowledge is not counted as such by K. It is hard on this basis to see how any assessment of a proposed definition of knowledge may be made, for what is the basis for saying that the counterexample is, or is not, obviously not knowledge?

What would a nondefinitional knowing what knowledge is amount to? An intuition? A particular feeling that you know something? Knowing it (that is knowledge) when you see it? What people agree to calling knowing something or call knowledge? None of these seem a very sound way of judging the correctness or the incorrectness of K, which can only be founded on something that puts us in a position to know that K is the correct definition of knowledge. As the various nondefinitional accounts of knowledge may not be all logically identical, and may indeed be contradictory, as what falls under 'know', one would have to find a way of deciding between them and have some kind of overarching understanding of what knowledge is. What features are required or not required for saying someone knows something is highly contentious. It is highly unsettled what features must and must not be a feature of knowledge.[3] In that case we would be no better off than before in trying to assess whether K is correct, as we would instead be in a position of having to assess which of the nondefinitional accounts of knowing or knowledge is correct, which in the case of determining whether K is correct was the whole point of appealing to a nondefinitional account of knowing or knowledge. One thing is for certain, that there are no agreed criteria or conditions for knowing whether something counts as a counterexample to K, therefore through no counterexample may it be shown that K is or is not, as example suggests that it is,

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[3] A good example is 'The Rocking-horse Winner', a short story by D. H. Lawrence. This is nicely explicated and explored in (Hamlyn, 1977, pp. 81-82). Whenever a boy sits on a rocking-horse he consistently gets the winner of a horse race right. At this level of rightness we would quite likely say that he knows the winner, without there being any idea of how he knows, any rationale for how he might come to know, despite that often being regarded as a condition for knowledge. Another example is that even truth, often thought uncontentious, has been disputed as a necessary condition for knowledge. (Popovic, 2015) The point here is not whether the argument for that is correct or not, but that even that is respectably disputable and leaves what knowledge is unsettled in such a way that we are in no position to assess a definition of knowledge as correct. The necessary connection between knowledge and belief may also be broken, or at least challenged, with a distinction between subjective and objective knowledge. (Popper, 1979).

the correct or incorrect definition of knowledge. One would have to be sure one knows that any putative counterexample is an instance of knowledge or not knowledge for it to count as an example or counterexample to test the validity or correctness of K.

It should be made clear that the issue and the concern of the argument here are quite different from the well-trodden matter of whether if you know something you must know that you know it.[4] For the subject here is not whether you can be a in a state of mind, or stand in some relation to the object of knowledge, such that one knows without knowing that one knows one is in that state of mind or knows one is stand in that relation also being so, but rather whether we can know that any definition of knowledge is correct or not. The issue here is not whether if one knows a definition of knowledge is correct whether one needs to know that one knows it is correct, but only whether you may know a definition of knowledge to be correct.

As has been said, typical of the fatally flawed method in assessing the correctness of the definition of knowledge is that it casually stated that from a counterexample it is 'clear' – sometimes the presumptive and one supposes rhetorically encouraging epithet 'obvious' or some other synonym is applied – that we do not know, and yet the case fits some proposed definition of knowledge, thus invalidating it as a correct definition of knowledge.[5] To say something is 'clear' is weak, thin, and ironically vague, stuff indeed, and nowhere near enough to form a ground for assessing the correctness of a definition. 'Clear' to whom? And how is 'clear' to be distinguished from the mere appearance of clarity. In bringing up something being clear we are no better off than when we say we know. Worse we would have to say we know what is clear and not clear for clarity to be of any use in judging via a counterexample the definition of knowledge K, so we are back to knowing again. If we are to be sure enough of the counterexamples to use them as counterexamples against a definition of knowledge, then we would surely have to be able to present something like a definition of knowledge or some other sure rigorous account which identifies them as our knowing that they were indeed such counterexamples. But then, we would be back to square one in our attempt to find out whether a definition of knowledge is correct by needing a definition, or some like enough to a definition, in order to assess the correctness of any definition. So, we cannot tell whether the counterexamples undermine the definition or not, as we do not know if they are counterexamples or not and would have to know it in order for them to carry the force of argument to either affirm or contradict the putative definition of knowledge K. It should be added, that K not an empirical contingent theory that might be supported in degrees by stronger or weaker evidence, but a necessary logical definition whose validity or correctness is either absolutely contradicted or not contradicted at all, according to its conditions, by counterexamples. One cannot affirm the correctness or incorrectness of something with a particular level of certainty by appealing to something whose certainty is less that what one is affirming.

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[4] That is that Kp→KKp. Here of course K is the knowledge operator 'knows that', and not the designator used for the definition of knowledge K in this paper.

[5] See (Gettier, 1963). In his paper Gettier uses phrases such as '…it is equally clear that Smith does not KNOW…', and '…then Smith does not KNOW that…' and '….does not state a sufficient condition for someone's knowing a given proposition.' But from whence is the clarity derived and justified. If it is said that we know we have such clarity, we are back with circularity. This argument completely undermines the validity of Gettier's argument, not because of whether he is right or wrong about the correctness of the tripartite definition of knowledge he happens to examine, but because he has no way on such weak and vague grounds of determining whether the definition, or any definition, is correct or not, for he has not shown he knows what knowledge is and thus that the counterexamples are counterexamples to the definition.

Conclusion

There is no way to know if any definition of knowledge is correct or incorrect. This is because it would either involve the circularity of referring to the definition of knowledge, or referring to some nondefinitional way of knowing what knowledge is, but there is not one whereby we may say we know the definition is correct or not.

In conclusion, therefore, we can never know that we have the definition of knowledge K, even if we do have it. For that we would need to know what knowledge is before it is defined. From which it follows that the attempt to define knowledge by all the usual criteria might be regarded as pointless. We may never know the definition of knowledge.

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