

Alvin I. Goldman's "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge"

I. RELIABLE PROCESSES

- Goldman says that "a cognitive mechanism or process is reliable if it not only produces true beliefs in actual situations, but would produce true beliefs, or at least inhibit false beliefs, in relevant counterfactual situations" (p. 85).
- He also says, "To be reliable, a cognitive mechanism must enable a person to discriminate or differentiate between incompatible states of affairs. It must operate in such a way that incompatible states of the world would generate different cognitive responses" (p. 85).
- The demands placed on a reliable process by (1) and by (2) are different demands. It's one thing to demand that such processes produce true beliefs, but it's quite another to demand that they be able to discriminate between one state of affairs and other, incompatible states of affairs. Consider, for example, Judy and Trudy. Imagine that I encounter Judy every day at work, and that I have no idea that Judy has a twin sister, Trudy. Moreover, I have never before encountered Trudy. Today, however, I see someone at the grocery store who looks (to me) exactly like Judy, and I believe that it *is* Judy. (Circumstances prevent me from acknowledging her, however.) In this case,
 - i. my belief-forming process(es) tend to produce true beliefs (about whether or not this is Judy), for whenever I encounter someone who looks (to me) exactly like Judy and believe that this is Judy, I am usually—indeed, in every case except one—correct; but
 - ii. my belief-forming process(es) does *not* enable me to discriminate between states of affairs in which I see Judy and those in which I see Trudy.
- This suggests, at least to my mind, a richer notion of reliability than the one Goldman presents in "What is justified belief?" (But see p. 98.)

II. KNOWLEDGE

S knows that *p* just in case S distinguishes or discriminates the truth of *p* from all relevant alternatives to *p*.

- What is an *alternative* to *p*? A proposition *q* is an alternative to *p* if and only if it cannot be true both that *q* and that *p*. Thus, this animal's being a Siberian grebe is an alternative to its being a Gadwall duck. For the animal cannot be both a Siberian grebe and a Gadwall duck.

III. HENRY AND THE BARN

- In the first case, Henry *knows* that this is a barn. He knows this (at least partly) because there are *no* relevant alternatives to its being a barn that he cannot distinguish from its being a barn.
- In the second case, Henry *fails* to know that this is a barn, for there *is* a relevant alternative to its being a barn, namely, the alternative that it's a papier-mâché facsimile of a barn, that he cannot distinguish from its being a barn.

IV. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO *ELIMINATE* A RELEVANT ALTERNATIVE?

- *The strongest view*: S can eliminate a relevant alternative *q* only if she *knows* that not-*q*.
- *The strong view*: S can eliminate a relevant alternative *q* only if *either* she knows that not-*q* *or* she has very good reason (justification) for believing that not-*q*.
- *The weak view*: S can eliminate a relevant alternative *q* only if she meets one of the following three conditions: (1) she knows that not-*q*, (2) she has very good reason (justification) for believing that not-*q*, or (3) S's belief that not-*q* is epistemically non-evidentially rational, where this is "a way in which it can be rational (or reasonable) [for S] to believe [that not-*q*] without possessing evidence for the belief."¹

V. WHAT MAKES AN ALTERNATIVE A *RELEVANT* ONE?

- The semantic content of 'know' contains (implicit) rules that map any putative knower's situation into a set of relevant alternatives. The upshot of this, or at least one of the upshots, is supposed to be that the standards for relevance do *not* shift from context to context.
- The semantic content of 'know' does *not* contain rules that map any putative knower's situation into a set of relevant alternatives. On this view, the standards for relevance *can* shift from context to context.
 - i. SUBJECT FACTORS: The set of relevant alternatives is determined, at least in part, by certain psychological regularities (say) that pertain in the putative knower's circumstances.
 - a. How *likely* the putative knower takes a certain alternative to be.

¹ Stewart Cohen, "How to be a fallibilist" *Philosophical Perspectives* 2, *Epistemology* (1988): 91-123, p. 112.

- b. How *similar* the putative knower takes a certain alternative to be.
 - c. How *important* it is to get things exactly right (in these circumstances).
 - d. Whether certain possibilities have been *mentioned* or are being *considered*.
 - ii. ATTRIBUTOR FACTORS: The set of relevant alternatives is determined by certain psychological regularities (say) that pertain *not only* in the putative knower's circumstances *but also* in the attributor's circumstances.
 - 1. *What an attributor presupposes* and *what an attributor takes for granted* are contextual factors that help to determine what proposition a knowledge attribution expresses (where propositions are determined by a sentence and a linguistic context). Thus, 'S knows that *p*' could express a true proposition in one context but a false proposition in another (given, of course, that the presuppositions of one attributor are different from those of the other).
 - 2. Knowledge attributions express vague or indeterminate propositions, and whether they **are taken as** true or false depends *neither* on attributor factors *nor* on subject factors, but rather on *interpreter* factors (i.e., on which relevant alternatives, if any, an interpreter has in mind).

VI. GOLDMAN'S ANALYSIS OF PERCEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE

S (noninferentially) perceptually knows that *p* if and only if

- i. S (noninferentially) perceptually believes that *p*,
- ii. *p* is true, and
- iii. there is no relevant alternative to *p*, *q*, such that if *q* were true (rather than *p*), S would (still) believe that *p*.

VII. PERCEPTUAL EQUIVALENTS

Which relevant alternatives can cause S to fail to know that *p*? *Only* those that are perceptually equivalent to *p* (see p. 92).

Does this mean that only perceptually equivalent alternatives can be relevant?

- 1. I can eliminate the alternative that, e.g., this is a chair.
- 2. That alternative is not perceptually equivalent to its being a table.

3. Thus, even if I can't eliminate the alternative that this is a chair, I can still know that this is a table (see p. 92).
4. But this suggests that the alternative that this is a chair – and, in fact, any alternative that is not perceptually equivalent to its being a table – is not relevant. For the relevant alternatives are just those that I must eliminate if I am to know.

Why is it the case that the Oscar-the-wolf alternative is not perceptually equivalent to the Dack-the-dachshund alternative?