

David Lewis's "Elusive Knowledge"

- I. *S* knows that *P* iff *S*'s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-*P* – Psst! – except for those possibilities that we are properly ignoring.
 - This theory, like Dretske's, is supposed to allow us to avoid both skepticism and fallibilism. We want to avoid both because:
 - it seems that knowledge must be *infallible*, i.e., that it must involve the elimination of every possibility of error; and
 - skepticism is bad. Um-kay.
 - The not-*p* possibilities, or alternatives, that we properly ignore are *irrelevant* alternatives, while those that we may not ignore are *relevant*. Thus, Lewis maintains that *S* knows that *p* iff *S*'s evidence eliminates every relevant alternative to *p*.
- II. Which alternatives are the relevant alternatives? There are, Lewis suggests, seven rules that help us to determine whether we may (or may not) ignore a particular alternative.
 1. RULE OF ACTUALITY: The possibility that actually obtains is never properly ignored.
 - "[I]t is the subject's actuality, not the ascriber's, that never can be properly ignored" (p. 226).
 - The subject's actuality is, for example, the possibility *de se et nunc* of being the subject on such-and-such a day at such-and-such a possible world.
 2. RULE OF BELIEF: A possibility may not be properly ignored if the subject gives it, or ought to give it, a degree of belief that is sufficiently high.
 - But how high is *sufficiently* high? Suppose that we are in criminal court, where there is more at stake than there is in, say, civil court. We want to know whether Stan committed the crime. If we give some alternative to that claim – say, that Sally committed the crime – even a slight degree of belief, that alternative can become relevant (and we'll need to eliminate it in order to know that Stan committed the crime).
 - Yet even here, where there's a lot at stake, there are possibilities that we can properly ignore, e.g., the possibility that it was Frank's dog, marvelously well trained, that committed the crime.
 3. RULE OF RESEMBLANCE: We may not ignore a possibility that saliently resembles a relevant possibility.

- This rule is supposed to do a lot of work. It's supposed to be the rule that allows Lewis's theory to account for lottery paradoxes and Gettier cases.
- LOTTERY PARADOXES: Do I know that I will lose the lottery? No. Why not? Because there is a relevant alternative to my losing, and I can't eliminate that alternative.
 - What's the relevant alternative? It's this: My ticket is the winning ticket.
 - Why is this alternative relevant? Because the possibility that *your* ticket is the winner saliently resembles the possibility that *any other ticket* is the winner, and one of those other tickets *actually is* the winner. Thus, the possibility that *your* ticket is the winner saliently resembles the possibility that the *winning* ticket is the winner (and this latter possibility is relevant by the Rule of Actuality).
- GETTIER CASE 1: Do I know that either Havit¹ or Nogot² owns a Ford? No. Why not? Because there is a relevant alternative to this claim, and I can't eliminate that alternative.
 - What's the relevant alternative? It's this: Nogot drives a Ford he does not own whereas Havit neither drives nor owns a car.
 - Why is this alternative relevant? Because it saliently resembles actuality (which is, of course, relevant by the Rule of Actuality).
 - First, it resembles actuality perfectly so far as Nogot is concerned.
 - Second, it saliently resembles Havit's actual habits, which are those of the Ford-less; and it saliently resembles the actual general correlation between Ford-lessness and habits like those of Havit.
- GETTIER CASE 2: Do I know that it is 4:39? No. Why not? Because there is a relevant alternative to its being 4:39, and I can't eliminate that alternative.
 - What's the relevant alternative? It's this: I've looked at a stopped clock at 4:22 (or whatever).
 - Why is this alternative relevant? Because it saliently—in fact *perfectly*—resembles actuality so far as the stopped clock goes; and it saliently—*almost perfectly*—resembles actuality so far as the time goes.
- GETTIER CASE 3: Do I know that this is a barn? No. Why not? Because there is a relevant alternative to its being a barn, and I can't eliminate that alternative.

¹ Havit, who owns a Ford, is never seen driving it and often seen taking the tram.

² Nogot, who does not own a Ford, is often seen driving one.

- o What's the relevant alternative? It's this: "I am seeing yet another of the abundant bogus barns" (p. 229).
 - o Why is this alternative relevant? Because it saliently resembles actuality (which is, of course, relevant by the Rule of Actuality) in this respect: in both cases, the actual case and the alternative case, there are the same number (an "abundance") of bogus barns, and the same number (a "scarcity") of real barns.
- GETTIER CASE 4: Do I know that Donald is in San Francisco? No. Why not? Because there is a relevant alternative to his being in San Francisco, and I can't eliminate that alternative.
 - o What's the relevant alternative? It's this: "Donald has gone to Italy and is sending me letters from there" (p. 229).
 - o Why is this alternative relevant? Because it saliently resembles actuality (which is, of course, relevant by the Rule of Actuality) in these respects: (a) letters are coming to me from Italy, and (b) those letters come, ultimately, from Donald.
- 4. RULE OF RELIABILITY: Defeasibly, we may ignore a possibility in which a reliable process (such as perception, memory, or testimony) fails.
- 5. RULE OF METHOD: Defeasibly, we are entitled properly to ignore possible failures in sampling (*induction*) and in inferences from the best explanation (*abduction*).
- 6. RULE OF CONSERVATISM: Defeasibly, generally ignored possibilities may properly be ignored.
- 7. RULE OF ATTENTION: A possibility not ignored at all is *ipso facto* not properly ignored.

III. Preventing a Possibility from Becoming Relevant

- We have a tacit agreement to speak *as if* we are ignoring a certain possibility (which has been brought to our attention and hence, by the Rule of Attention, is not properly ignored).
- We bend the rules, perhaps with good reason.

IV. Lewis seems to hold the view that it's attributor factors that determine the set of relevant alternatives (except when it comes to the Rule of Actuality, for, there, "it is the subject's actuality, not the ascriber's, that never can be properly ignored" (p. 226).

V. Kinds of Possibilities

1. Those that *can* be eliminated, but that *cannot* be properly ignored
 - Do I know that Possum is not in the study? One alternative is that Possum is just over there (in the study) in plain view. I can eliminate this possibility, by looking over there, and it is a possibility that I cannot properly ignore.
2. Those that *cannot* be eliminated, but that *can* be properly ignored
 - Do I know that Possum is not in the study? One alternative is that Possum is on the desk but has been made invisible by a deceiving demon. I cannot eliminate this possibility, but it is a possibility that I can properly ignore.
3. Those that might *either* be eliminated *or* ignored
 - Do I know that Possum is not in the study? One alternative is that Possum has somehow managed to get into a drawer that is now closed (and hence is in the study). I can eliminate this possibility, by opening the drawer and making a thorough examination, or I can (usually) properly ignore that possibility.
 - In the usual situation, one in which I'm properly ignoring the possibility that Possum is in a closed drawer, I can
 - know that Possum is not in the study by eliminating every possibility that is not properly ignored, and
 - know *better* that Possum is not in the study by eliminating possibilities that *are* properly ignored (e.g., the possibility that Possum is in a closed drawer).