

**Can Fallibility Be Known?**

by

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## Can Fallibility Be Known?

One of the chief benefits of philosophic activity, in my view, is that it can reduce the dogmatic temper of mind, which is otherwise natural. As A. J. Ayer correctly observes, it is inconsistent to assert that you know something, but that you may be wrong. This is a simple consequence of the fact, by definition, if you are wrong then you don't know the thing in question. Ayer also says that we know, in general, that we can be mistaken any particular time we say we know something.<sup>1</sup> If this is true, then it follows that we could know that we could be mistaken when we say we know something. This knowledge, that we could be mistaken, is easily verbalized, but to do so is contradictory. It would seem then that fallibility cannot be known, and dogmatism is justified.

This essay will assume knowledge is true belief, for which one has sufficient evidence. Some discussion of the character of sufficient evidence is needed to explore the above problem, but details are not needed. The philosopher seeks knowledge, because he seeks truth. He has no access to the truth except knowledge, and the only means he has to knowledge is through sufficient evidence.

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<sup>1</sup>A. J. Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge (Middlesex, England, 1972), p. 25.

Does sufficient evidence for a belief imply the truth of the belief? If so, whenever we have sufficient evidence for something we believe, then we have knowledge. If not, then sometimes we will have sufficient evidence for something we believe, and not have knowledge. The belief is false, even though we have sufficient evidence for it. It would seem that we could never know when we knew something, if sufficient evidence doesn't imply truth. This is not true. Suppose we know something. Then we have sufficient evidence for it, it is true, and we believe it. Since sufficient evidence is the basis of epistemic justification, it follows that you must have sufficient evidence that your evidence is sufficient, or your evidence isn't sufficient. This doesn't lead to an infinite regress. It simply means that nothing can be asked for beyond sufficient evidence. So we must say we have sufficient evidence that we have sufficient evidence for our belief. We already had sufficient evidence for the belief itself, and, except in certain extraordinary cases, we will have sufficient evidence that we have the belief. Thus, generally, if we know something we will have sufficient evidence that we know it. Believing we know something probably involves an additional psychological act in addition to the belief of the thing known, so that though there is no precise limit to the number of knowings we can have about our knowings, some actual limit will always exist. In conclusion, saying that sufficient evidence for a belief does not imply the truth of a belief, does not imply that we cannot know that we know it.

So far it has not been shown whether or not sufficient evidence for a belief implies the belief is true. One argument against the view, that sufficient evidence for a belief doesn't imply the belief is true, has been eliminated however. I will now consider the nature of sufficient evidence more directly. The two types of knowledge that have greatest certainty are those of immediate experience and those of logic. However, if these are the only evidence available, then even if these are taken as absolutely certain (and mathematics is included in logic), much of what is normally considered known could not be known. It is not logically inconsistent for me to have the immediate experience I have, and for material objects and other people not to exist. Therefore, if we have more than a skeleton of knowledge, means of inference which are not deductive must be admitted. Of course such rules of inference cannot be justified deductively, or they wouldn't be needed in the first place. I don't desire, at this time, to formulate such rules of inference, but rather to consider certain problems in this light. First, when non-demonstrative rules of inference are part of the sufficient evidence we have for a belief, then the sufficient evidence for the belief will not imply that the belief is true.

When should a philosopher say he knows something? The answer seems obvious. The philosopher seeks truth. His only means to truth is knowledge, and his only means to knowledge is to believe what he has sufficient evidence for. Thus, whenever

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If a philosopher has sufficient evidence for a belief he should believe it and say he knows it. Obvious as this view is, I believe it is mistaken.

Suppose there is sufficient evidence for a number of beliefs. Later, when more evidence is available, there is sufficient evidence that these beliefs were false. This fallibility seems to me just as much a fact in the world as material objects or other people, so our non-demonstrative rules of inference could be such that we can know this fallibility. Also if the philosopher knows he is using non-demonstrative rules of inference, he should know they are fallible.

The problem in the view that a philosopher should say he knows something whenever he has sufficient evidence for it is now evident. He may have sufficient evidence for something and also have sufficient evidence that it may be false. If he says he knows both, he contradicts himself. Any contradiction implies that all beliefs are both true and false so his position is ridiculous.

It could be suggested that a philosopher should say he knows something, if the thing is of a positive nature, i.e. does not cast doubt upon anything else for which he has sufficient evidence. He would refuse to talk about fallibility in order to avoid contradiction. The philosopher would refuse to believe anything which would cast doubt upon some other belief, for which he has sufficient evidence. He could then maximize his positive knowledge, sacrificing only knowing his own fallibility.

I desire this suggestion to be rejected, although I can find nothing wrong with the logic in it. An illustration may show why I feel this way. Suppose a patient is ill and there is sufficient evidence for the belief that he is barely into the incurable stage of the disease. Suppose also that there is sufficient evidence that this diagnosis is fallible. If only the positive belief is asserted, then there would be no reason to continue the treatment upon the basis that the positive belief is fallible. I refuse to believe that this is desirable. It also, in my opinion, does not accord with common usage, but I have not conducted a survey on this point. The best procedure is probably to avoid statements of knowledge, and only make statements about sufficient evidence for beliefs. If statements of knowledge are made, the person involved will have to select from the beliefs, for which he has sufficient evidence, upon the basis of circumstances and his desires.