YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH: KNOWLEDGE = EPISTEMIC CERTAINTY

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ABSTRACT: In this discussion note, I put forth an argument from the factivity of knowledge for the conclusion that knowledge is *epistemic* certainty. If this argument is sound, then epistemologists who think that knowledge is factive are thereby also committed to the view that knowledge is *epistemic* certainty.

KEYWORDS: epistemic certainty, factivity, fallibilism, knowledge

It is a commonly held view among contemporary epistemologists that knowledge is factive.[1] To say that knowledge is factive is to say that, if S knows that p, then p is true.[2] In other words, if S knows that p, then p cannot be false. But if p cannot be false, then p is *epistemically* certain, i.e., certainty as an epistemic property of propositions rather than a property of subjects.[3] For to say that p is epistemically certain is to say that p is guaranteed to be true; it cannot be false.[4] As Klein puts it, "if e makes p certain, the *truth* of p must be guaranteed by e" (emphasis in original).[5] Therefore, if S knows that p on the grounds that e, then e makes p epistemically certain.

Accordingly, the argument from the factivity of knowledge for the conclusion that knowledge is epistemic certainty runs as follows:

1) If S knows that p on the grounds that e, then p cannot be false given e.

2) If p cannot be false given e, then e makes p epistemically certain.

3) Therefore, if S knows that p on the grounds that e, then e makes p epistemically certain.

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[1] See, for example, Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 131.

[2] Jennifer Nagel, "Knowledge as a Mental State," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology Vol. 4*, eds. T. Szabó Gendler and J. Hawthorne, 273-308 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 277.

[3] Baron Reed, "Certainty," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2011 Edition, 2011). https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/certainty.

[4] Roderick Firth, "The Anatomy of Certainty," *The Philosophical Review* 76 (1967): 3-27.

[5] P.D. Klein, *Certainty: A Refutation of Scepticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 185.

If hypothetical syllogism is a valid logical form, then this argument is deductively valid. Premise (1) is simply a statement of the thesis that knowledge is factive, which contemporary epistemologists generally accept. Premise (2) is true by definition, since to say that a proposition is *epistemically* certain (again, not to be confused with psychological certainty, which is often cached out in terms of indubitability[6]) is to say that it cannot be false; a proposition that is epistemically certain is guaranteed to be true.[7] Now, "if e makes p certain, the *truth* of p must be guaranteed by e,"[8] and S knows that p on the grounds that e, then e makes p epistemically certain. So it appears that this argument is sound.

It might be objected that there is a scope ambiguity in this argument. That is, the thesis that knowledge is factive is a wide-scope claim, i.e., $\Box(K_P{\rightarrow}p)$, whereas the thesis about epistemic certainty is a narrow-scope claim, i.e., $\Box p{\rightarrow}EC_p$. But this is mistaken, for what makes p epistemically certain is the evidence e, not that p is a necessary truth. In other words, a proposition is epistemically certain given the evidence for it, whereas a proposition can be necessarily true independently of the evidence for it. Now, if e is such that p cannot be false given e, then p is epistemically certain given e. And if S knows that p on the grounds that e, then p is epistemically certain given e. That is:

1) $K_{p|e}{\rightarrow}\Box p|e$

2) $\Box p|e \rightarrow EC_{p|e}$

3) $K_{p|e}{\rightarrow} EC_{p|e}$

Some might also object to this argument by saying that, if it is sound, then it means that we know very little (or maybe even nothing at all) because few of our beliefs (if any) are epistemically certain.

To this objection, "so what?" seems to be an appropriate response. The fact that a truth is difficult for people to accept is *not* evidence against it. Some religious believers find it difficult to accept the theory of evolution by natural selection, since they think that the theory is inconsistent with their religious beliefs. But the mere fact that those religious believers find it difficult to accept the theory of evolution by natural selection is *not* evidence against the theory itself. Similarly, if the thesis that knowledge is epistemic certainty has consequences that we find difficult to accept, then that fact alone does not count as evidence against the thesis that knowledge is epistemic certainty.

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[6] Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

[7] Reed, "Certainty," https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/certainty.

[8] Klein, *Certainty*, 185.

Perhaps with few exceptions, such as Fred Dretske,[9] who argued that knowledge requires conclusive justification,[10] most contemporary epistemologists want to allow for knowledge even in cases where the justification is less than conclusive in order to block skeptical arguments. On this view, fallible knowledge of p requires sufficient evidence for p (how much is sufficient, exactly?), albeit not the sort of evidence that entails p. For instance, one can have fallible – but not infallible – knowledge that one has two hands.[11]

If the argument sketched above is sound, however, then the following theses would be inconsistent:

A.   Knowledge is factive.

B.   Knowledge is fallible.

As I have argued above, since contemporary epistemologists generally accept (A), they are also committed to the conclusion that knowledge is epistemic certainty, i.e., (3), since this conclusion follows from (A) by the argument sketched above. If we accept both (A) and (3), however, we must reject (B). For to say that knowledge is fallible is to say that S can know that p on the grounds that e even if the truth of p is not guaranteed by e.[12] But this is contrary to (A) and (3), which state that, if S knows that p on the grounds that e, then p is guaranteed to be true by e; it cannot be false.[13] If the argument sketched above is sound, then (A) implies (3), which would mean, in turn, that we should hold on to (A) and (3), and reject (B).

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[9] Fred Dretske, *Perception, Knowledge, and Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[10] Fred Dretske, "Gettier and Justified True Belief: 50 Years On," in *The Philosophers' Magazine* (23 January, 2015), https://www.philosophersmag.com/essays/10-gettier-and-justified-true-belief-50-years-on.

[11] See, for example, Ben Bronner, "Assertions Only?" *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy* 2 (2013): 44-52.

[12] Jessica Brown, *Fallibilism: Evidence and Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.

[13] Reed, "Certainty," https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/certainty.