

KNOWLEDGE DOESN'T REQUIRE EPISTEMIC CERTAINTY: A REPLY TO MIZRAHI

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ABSTRACT: In a recent discussion note in this journal, Moti Mizrahi offers us the following argument for the conclusion that knowledge requires epistemic certainty:

- 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.

I'll argue that (2) of Mizrahi's argument is false, and so, Mizrahi's argument is unsound.

KEYWORDS: knowledge, epistemic certainty, possible circumstance

In a recent discussion note in this journal, Moti Mizrahi¹ provides the following argument for the conclusion that knowledge requires epistemic certainty:

- 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.²
- 3) Therefore, if S knows that p on the grounds that e, then e makes p epistemically certain.

Let's call this Mizrahi's Argument.

I'll argue that (2) of Mizrahi's Argument is false, and so Mizrahi's Argument is unsound. To see this, consider the following scenario:

Math. Suppose my mathematician dad, an honest and reliable fellow, tells me that $2+2=4$. On this basis, I come to believe that $2+2=4$.

¹ Moti Mizrahi, "You can't handle the truth: knowledge = epistemic certainty," *Logos & Episteme* X, 2 (2019): 225-227.

² Following Mizrahi (*ibid.*, 225) and Peter Klein, *Certainty: A Refutation of Scepticism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 185, I'll take "e makes p epistemically certain" to mean e guarantees the truth of p.

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Now, observe, that $2+2=4$ is necessarily true, and so it cannot be false in any logically possible circumstance. If $2+2=4$ cannot be false in any possible circumstance, then it cannot be false, given that my honest and reliable mathematician dad tells me that $2+2=4$ and that I come to believe that $2+2=4$ on this basis. Yet, intuitively, my honest and reliable mathematician dad telling me that it's true that $2+2=4$ doesn't *guarantee* that it is true that $2+2=4$. After all, honest and reliable experts tell people things all the time that aren't true. In Math, of course, my dad tells me something that's necessarily true, and so he couldn't have told me something that isn't true, if he tells me that $2+2=4$. But, quite plausibly, what guarantees the truth of $2+2=4$ isn't my dad telling me, in Math, that it's true that $2+2=4$. It's that, in fact, $2+2=4$.

If this interpretation of Math is correct, as is very plausible, then (2) of Mizrahi's Argument must be false. Since there's some metaphysically possible circumstance where it's true that p cannot be false given e , but it's false that e makes p epistemically certain—i.e., it's false that e guarantees the truth of p . Thus, Mizrahi's Argument is unsound.