

DOES RECOGNITION REQUIRE KNOWLEDGE?

Philip ATKINS

ABSTRACT: Christina Dietz has recently argued that object recognition requires knowledgeable reidentification. I argue against her thesis and propose an alternative diagnosis of the case that she uses to motivate her thesis.

KEYWORDS: recognition, knowledge, justification, Gettier cases, epistemic luck

Object recognition is described by attributions of the form '*S* recognizes *NP*' where '*NP*' is a noun phrase. Christina Dietz (2024) has recently argued that object recognition requires knowledge, meaning that if '*S* recognizes *NP*' is true, then '*NP*' designates an object *X* and *S* knowledgeably reidentifies *X*. Reidentification involves correctly matching a stored representation of *X* with another representation of *X*, typically a demonstrative one. In order for *S*'s reidentification to count as knowledgeable reidentification, it must involve an identity belief that counts as knowledge. In order for Jack to recognize Jill, for example, Jack must reidentify Jill and this reidentification must involve an identity belief that counts as knowledge, perhaps one that might be expressed by 'That is Jill'. Roughly, Jack must know that *that is Jill* when recognizing Jill in a given scenario.¹ I argue that Dietz is incorrect in suggesting that object recognition requires such knowledge. For example, it is possible for Jack to recognize Jill in a given scenario without knowing that *that is Jill* in the scenario.

Before proceeding to my argument, it would be appropriate to discuss the Gettier-style case that Dietz uses to motivate her view. Suppose that Maria stands in front of four dimly lit cages, each with a man trapped inside. One of these men is her husband. The others are men of similar appearance. Maria is tasked with identifying her husband. As Dietz writes, "Suppose a trick of the light made her husband's shirt (but not the other shirts) appear to be the very shade of pink that dominates his wardrobe. (In fact, it is a cream shirt illuminated by pink light.) On this basis, Maria points to the second cage and confidently exclaims 'That is my husband!' Her belief is true, and given the perceptual appearances, her belief is justified too. But while Maria certainly takes herself to recognize her husband, there

¹ This is putting the point roughly because Dietz argues that recognition attributions are context sensitive, so which identity beliefs are relevant will vary from context to context. I revisit the point below.

is still something deeply wrong about saying that upon looking into cage two, Maria *recognizes* her husband" (2024, 1624-1625). Dietz's diagnosis of this case is that Maria fails to recognize her husband because Maria lacks knowledge, even though Maria has a justified true belief.

This diagnosis, I think, is too quick, for there are cases of object recognition without knowledge. Even though a justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge, I assume that a justified true belief is necessary for knowledge. So, if *S* knows *p*, then it must be the case that *S* believes *p* and that this belief is justified. I also assume, provisionally, that *S*'s belief is justified only if the totality of *S*'s evidence supports *p* and that *S* believes *p* on the basis of this evidence. Importantly, this is compatible with *S*'s having evidence that opposes *p*, provided that this evidence is outweighed by other evidence. Consider, now, the following case. Krusty the Clown, a popular entertainer, is seen by the entire town of Springfield flying recklessly through the air in his plane, yelling and waving to the crowd below. Then he is seen crashing into the side of a mountain, his plane exploding in flames. After extensive investigation, it is concluded that Krusty perished in the crash. Indeed, the odds of his survival are estimated to be the odds of winning the lottery. However, against the odds, Krusty has survived and resumed life under an alias. Suppose, now, that Bart glimpses Krusty on the street and reidentifies him. Although Krusty is wearing a disguise and quickly disappears into the crowd, Bart notices enough resemblances, such as a distinctive scar, that he correctly forms the belief that *that is Krusty*. It seems appropriate to say in this case that Bart recognizes Krusty. However, it is plausible that Bart does not know that *that is Krusty*, for we can suppose that the totality of his evidence does not support this proposition. After all, it is stipulated that the odds of Krusty's survival are extremely remote. All things considered, it is more likely that Bart misidentified someone as Krusty, even though he did not. Given the situation, it is arguably more reasonable for Bart to believe that someone else has a similar scar or that perhaps he imagined the scar in his grief over Krusty's death.²

It might be said that, although Bart does not know that *that is Krusty*, he has some other identity belief that counts as knowledge, which is sufficient to say in this scenario that Bart recognizes Krusty. Indeed, it is part of Dietz's account that recognition attributions are context sensitive, so which identity beliefs are relevant will vary from context to context. In one context, according to Dietz, the relevant belief might involve the proposition *that is the celebrity dog that I've seen in movies*, while in others it might involve the proposition *that is the dog that I saw rolling in the yard earlier* (2024, 1625). In this scenario, however, it is difficult to see what the

² This case is adapted from episode 15 of season 7 of *The Simpsons*.

alternative belief might be. If Bart fails to know that *that is Krusty* due to his evidential situation, then for the same reason he fails to know that *that is the famous entertainer who crashed his plane into a mountain*, among other such descriptive propositions. It is true that Bart knows a proposition along the lines of *that is the guy on the street who looks similar to Krusty in certain respects such as having a distinctive scar*, but knowledge of this proposition hardly seems relevant. The basic point of reidentification is that the subject *S* correctly matches a stored representation of the relevant *X* with another representation of *X*, typically a demonstrative one. Here we have the demonstrative representation, but *the guy on the street who looks similar to Krusty in certain respects such as having a distinctive scar* is presumably not one of Bart's stored representations of Krusty.

It is perhaps more promising to insist that Bart knows that *that is Krusty* despite his evidential situation. There are various ways of pursuing this line of thought. The most obvious way is by rejecting the broadly evidentialist account of justification that I have provisionally assumed. There are, after all, several respectable non-evidentialist accounts of justification. Among other possibilities, perhaps a justified belief is a belief that results from a *reliable* (Goldman 1979) or *properly functioning* (Plantinga 1993) belief forming process. Bart's vision is presumably reliable and properly functioning, at least if we assume that the environmental conditions are favorable. And if we assume that the environmental conditions are unfavorable, perhaps because the street is dark, or that Bart's vision is somehow defective, then it is less plausible to say that Bart recognizes Krusty. So, if we abandon a broadly evidentialist account of justification in favor of some non-evidentialist account, then we can preserve Dietz's thesis that object recognition requires knowledgeable reidentification.

This is not the place to engage in a detailed evaluation of evidentialist accounts of justification versus non-evidentialist accounts. Suffice it to say that, if a broadly evidentialist account is correct, then there is a strong case to be made that Dietz's thesis is incorrect. This itself is an observation worth making. But here I wish to argue that Dietz's thesis is incorrect regardless of which account of justification is correct. I wish to suggest that Dietz's thesis is incorrect so long as it is agreed that knowing *p* entails believing *p*. Consider a different version of the Krusty case. Suppose that Bart encounters Krusty on the street. Indeed, suppose that Krusty is not even wearing a disguise. He appears exactly as he has always appeared on television, with his famous green hair and so on. Bart's heart leaps in his chest, for it occurs to him that he might have just spotted his favorite entertainer. However, Bart is cautious. He remembers the plane crash and seems to vaguely recall that Krusty has a twin who sometimes visits Springfield. Instead of forming the belief that *that*

is Krusty, he decides that further investigation is necessary. He therefore suspends judgment. Now, it turns out that Bart is misremembering the story of Krusty having a twin. Perhaps he has confused Krusty with a different entertainer. Regardless, Bart does not form the belief that *that is Krusty* and therefore does not come to know that *that is Krusty*. Still, it seems accurate to say that Bart recognizes Krusty. After all, he presumably recognizes *someone* in this scenario. And what other candidate is available for recognition other than Krusty himself, the very man whom Bart has encountered on the street?

Against the intuitive claim that Bart recognizes Krusty, it might be observed that if someone were to ask Bart whether he recognizes Krusty, he would not immediately assent. This observation is correct, but it does not show that Bart fails to recognize Krusty. Since he suspends judgment, the most natural response to the question is that he does not yet know whether he recognizes Krusty. This, I submit, is entirely compatible with him recognizing Krusty. Object recognition is not a transparent mental state such that, if a subject possesses the mental state, then the subject must be aware of this fact. Compare: if someone were to ask Bart whether he *sees* Krusty, he would not assent. He would presumably say that he does not yet know. It would be hasty to conclude on this basis that Bart fails to see Krusty. On the contrary, it is clear that Bart *does* see Krusty. Furthermore, it might be observed that, although it would not be appropriate in this scenario for Bart to straightforwardly say 'I recognize Krusty', it might be appropriate for Krusty to say 'Bart recognizes me' before fleeing the scene. Similarly, if Bart were to eventually confirm Krusty's identity by ruling out the possibility that Krusty has a twin, it would be appropriate for him to say 'I recognized Krusty on the street' when recounting the story.³

Now, I drew an analogy above between recognizing an object and seeing an object. To be clear, I do not insist that this analogy is perfect. There are salient differences between recognizing an object and seeing an object. For example, I agree with Dietz that Maria sees her husband even though she does not recognize her

³ On my view, Bart recognizes Krusty even in versions of the case where Bart dissents when asked whether he recognizes Krusty. Suppose, for example, that Bart is so convinced that Krusty has a twin that he immediately rejects the possibility that it is Krusty on the street. 'If I didn't know any better', he might think to himself, 'I'd swear that's Krusty standing there, but he must be Krusty's twin since Krusty died in that plane crash'. My thought here is that Bart recognizes Krusty despite the fact that he firmly believes that he does not recognize Krusty, just as Bart sees Krusty despite the fact that he firmly believes that he does not see Krusty. Note, however, that even if one is hesitant to endorse my verdict here, Dietz's thesis is refuted so long as one shares my intuition that Bart recognizes Krusty in cases where he merely suspends judgment about whether that's Krusty standing there.

husband (2024, 1625, *n.* 19). This hints at a different way of defending Dietz's view. Perhaps I have conflated *recognizing* with *seeing* in my evaluation of the Krusty case. Bart sees Krusty, to be sure, but Bart does not recognize Krusty. The intuition that Bart recognizes Krusty results from confusing these two notions. Against this suggestion, I would argue that the notion of seeing an object is too weak to capture what is distinctive about the Krusty case. The bar for seeing an object is so low that merely being visually aware of an object would arguably count as seeing it. In the Maria case, for example, Maria would count as seeing her husband even if she never reidentifies him. Similarly, Bart would count as seeing Krusty even if it never occurs to him that the man in question might be the famous entertainer. Indeed, Bart would count as seeing Krusty even if Bart has no idea who Krusty is. However, the case as it was originally described is significantly different. Despite the fact that Bart does not form the identity belief that *that is Krusty*, he correctly matches a stored representation of Krusty with his current demonstrative one. And, importantly, Bart correctly matches these representations in a way that is reliable and properly functioning. In other words, Bart not only reidentifies Krusty, he reidentifies him in a way that is reliable and properly functioning, not in a way that depends on luck. This is what is truly responsible for the intuition, which I think is accurate, that Bart recognizes Krusty. And this, I submit, is what is truly responsible for the intuition, which I also think is accurate, that Maria does not recognize her husband. The crucial factor in that case is not that Maria lacks knowledge, since recognition does not require knowledge, or even belief. The crucial factor is that Maria's reidentification of her husband is due to luck, not to her having a reliable and properly functioning ability to match representations.

Here, then, is my proposal. In order for '*S* recognizes *NP*' to be true, where '*NP*' designates an object *X*, it is not necessary that *S* knowledgeably reidentifies *X*. Rather it is necessary that *S* reidentifies *X* in a way that is not dependent on luck. It is because Maria's reidentification of her husband depends on luck that she fails to recognize him. There are different ways of spelling out this diagnosis of the Maria case, depending on how we wish to spell out the relevant notion of luck. This is familiar ground to epistemologists in the post-Gettier era (Engel 2025). I do not intend to retread it here. Suffice it to say that, however the notion is spelled out, this diagnosis is at least as plausible as Dietz's. Indeed, I submit that this diagnosis is more plausible, since it accommodates the intuition that Bart has recognized Krusty even in cases where Bart lacks knowledge.

References

Dietz, C. 2024. "Recognition." *Erkenntnis* 89: 1617-1628.

Philip Atkins

Engel, M. 2025. "Epistemic Luck." *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by J. Fieser and B. Dowden. URL = <<https://iep.utm.edu/epi-luck/>>. Accessed on Jan. 7, 2025.

Goldman, A. 1979. "What Is Justified Belief?" In *Justification and Knowledge: New Studies in Epistemology*, edited by G. S. Pappas, 1-25. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

Plantinga, A. 1993. *Warrant and Proper Function*. Oxford University Press.