

Response to Hawthorne

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In (Harman and Sherman 2004) we argued for two theses.

- (T1) What one knows can and usually does rest on assumptions one justifiably takes for granted without knowing them to be true.
- (T2) One knows only if one believes as one does because of something that settles the truth of that belief.

This was part of a symposium on (Hawthorne 2004a). Hawthorne replies to us in (Hawthorne 2004c). This is our response to his reply. We think that the issues are important.

Knowledge and Assumptions

Inference and Implication

Hawthorne discusses (without endorsing) the following instance of our (T1) , “One knows that one is seeing a desk by taking for granted, but without knowing, that one is not a brain in a vat” (510). We believe that this is a commonsensical way of describing an ordinary situation. Intuitively, one knows one is seeing a desk. Intuitively one is normally justified in taking it for granted that one is not a brain in a vat, but one does not *know* one isn’t a brain in a vat.

Suppose p is *that one is seeing a desk* and q is *that one is not a brain in a vat*. Concerning what we take to be the commonsensical view of this case Hawthorne says,

The authors realize that a consequence of their proposal is that, very often, one knows p , does not know q , is in a position to competently infer q from p (without thereby losing knowledge that p), but is nevertheless in no position to know that q (510).

Comment: We do not “realize” any such thing, because, as we argue, Hawthorne’s way of putting the point confuses recognizing an implication with inferring what’s implied. We precisely do not

suppose that in the case under discussion one is in a position “to competently infer” (the proposition that) q from (the proposition that) p , at least in the ordinary sense of “infer” in which to infer something is to come to believe it on the basis of that inference. No one who uses terms in this ordinary sense thinks one can competently *infer* that one is not a brain in a vat from one’s knowledge that one is seeing a desk, precisely because one’s knowledge rests on one’s taking if for granted such things as that one is not a brain in a vat. Such an inference would clearly be incompetent, not competent.

A better formulation of the passage from Hawthorne might be: “An obvious consequence of the authors’ proposal is that, very often, one knows that p , does not know that q , knows that the proposition that q is implied by the proposition that p , but is nevertheless in no position to know that q by recognizing this implication.”

In any event, Hawthorne then says that our view “requires a rejection of the single premise closure principle that struck me as so compelling” (510). He attaches a footnote to this sentence discussing our complaint about his statement of this principle, which is that, “if S knows p and competently deduces q from p , thereby coming to believe q , while retaining knowledge of p throughout, then S comes to know q ” (Hawthorne 2004b, page 477).

In the attached footnote Hawthorne says (522),

I had used the verb ‘deduce’ in stating single premise closure. Harman and Sherman complain that this is to ‘confuse questions of implication with questions of inference. A deduction is a structured abstract object’ (p. 495). Part of the disagreement is surely terminological. There is a perfectly good use of the English verb ‘deduce’ where it denotes an activity. There is more to say on this matter, but I shall not try to say it here.

Comment: There is indeed a perfectly good use of the English verb ‘deduce’ to refer to inference, as when Sherlock Holmes is said to deduce who the murderer is. But in this ordinary usage, to deduce a particular conclusion is to infer it. So competently to deduce something would be competently to infer it. If one cannot competently infer something, one cannot competently deduce it in this sense either! Our point was and is that there is a difference between inferring that q and merely recognizing that something one believes implies that q . If one cannot competently infer that q one cannot competently deduce that q in this ordinary sense of ‘deduce’.

There is indeed a common philosophical use of ‘deduce’ which simply conflates these two distinct things. And we recognized that Hawthorne was using ‘deduce’ in that way. But we do not agree that this is “a perfectly good use of the English verb ‘deduce’.” That is why we objected as we did.

Oddity

Next Hawthorne argues as follows:

Claims such as ‘I do not know whether or not the flight will crash but I do know that I will be at the arrivals gate following my flight’ and ‘I do not know whether or not I am dreaming right now but I do know that I am in my kitchen’ sound extremely odd. Harman and Sherman tell us that they are true, but offer little by way of explanation for their oddity.

Comment: Consider the following examples.

- (1) I do not know whether or not the flight will crash but I do know that I will be at the arrivals gate following my flight.
- (2) I do not know whether or not I am dreaming right now but I do know that I am in my kitchen.
- (3) In thinking about where I will be following my flight, I assume that things will go well and in particular that my plane will not crash. It seems to me that I am perfectly justified in taking that for granted. Given that assumption, I know that I will be at the arrivals gate following my flight.
- (4) I do not know whether or not I am dreaming. I think I am in the kitchen. In thinking this, I assume that I am not dreaming. As far as I can see I am justified in taking that for granted and, given that assumption, I know I am in the kitchen.

While (1) and (2) can seem odd as remarks out of the blue, (3) and (4) are not at all odd. Furthermore (1) is not odd if preceded by (3) and (2) is not odd if preceded by (4). So, we suggest that whatever oddness there is to (1) and (2) is pragmatic, due to its being unclear what point the speaker is trying to make. Putting these remarks in context removes any oddness, or so it seems to us.

Details

Next Hawthorne raises the following “worry.” We have given some examples, noting that there are situations in which taking it for granted that S will lose the lottery can support knowing that S will not be able to afford an African safari this year but not support knowing that S will lose the lottery. But we have not provided specified general principles for determining when one can know that p because one takes it for granted that q but not know that r on that basis.

Comment: While we agree that it would be nice to provide such principles, we do not see that it is any objection to our commonsensical approach that we have failed to do so. Is it an objection to our approach that we do not provide a definition of *know*?

Betting

There are situations which it is reasonable to describe using (5) but not using (6) or (7). In taking himself to be seeing a zebra, S justifiably takes for granted that the animal in the cage is not in

disguise. *S* is justified in taking that for granted but does not know that it is true.

- (5) *S* knows that the animal in the cage is a zebra.
- (6) *S* knows that the animal in the cage is not a cleverly disguised non-zebra.
- (7) *S* knows that the animal he sees is a zebra and not a cleverly disguised non-zebra.

Hawthorne objects:

Suppose two prizes are offered. I get prize X if and only if the animal in the cage is a zebra. I get prize Y iff the animal is a zebra and (ipso facto) not a cleverly disguised non-zebra. (Suppose the case is set up so that the offering of the prize does not provide special evidence of disguise). Do I really want to say that I know that I will get prize X but do not know whether or not that I will win prize Y, even though I know with a priori certainty that I will get prize X iff I get prize Y? Such thoughts seem altogether bizarre to me (511).

Comment: We do not find those thoughts “altogether bizarre,” when considered carefully. It may help to think about the additional case in which *S* knows he will get prize *Z* if and only if the animal in the cage is not in disguise. Although *S* assumes that the animal in the cage is not in disguise, by hypothesis he does not know it. It also seems to us clear then that *S* does not know he will get prize *Z*. That thought is surely not at all bizarre. Nor is it bizaare to think that *S* does not know he will get prize *Y*.

References

Harman, G. and Sherman, B., (2004). “Knowledge, Assumptions, Lotteries,” *Philosophical Issues*, 14, *Epistemology* (2004): 492-500.

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