

Veritism

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PHLB20 Lecture Notes 2

We have been pushing the idea that knowledge is ‘subjective’, in the sense that a claim that S knows that P is an instruction to take S as an authority on P .

‘Veritism’ is the view that knowledge is an objective phenomenon. A central way of developing this says that knowledge is belief that is not just true but also ‘sure to be true’: that is not just ‘true by luck’.

These notes discuss this idea in the context of examining Goldman’s classic paper ‘A causal theory of knowing’. Goldman suggests here that causation is incompatible with luck, and therefore can be used to define knowledge.

My central point will be that luck, and more specifically causation, are subjective phenomena, having to do with what we choose to pay attention to and ignore. So the appeal to luck—or, more specifically, causation—can’t save veritism.

1 The logic of uncertainty

Recall that, although

$$P \not\models BP,$$

and therefore

$$\neg P \not\models B\neg P,$$

nevertheless

$$\neg P \not\models \neg BP.$$

After all, if $\neg BP \vdash \neg P$, then since $\neg P \vdash B\neg P$, we would be able to eliminate the middle term and conclude that $\neg BP \vdash B\neg P$.

But this is wrong. ‘ BP ’ means something like ‘I am certain that P is true’. Therefore $\neg BP$ means ‘I am not certain that P is true’ and $B\neg P$ means ‘I am certain that P is false’. But there is a middle state between certainty that P is true and certainty that P is false, namely uncertainty about P . In this middle state, one is not certain that P , but also not certain that $\neg P$.

We can think of what one is certain of in terms of which possibilities one is willing to take seriously. If I am certain that P , I

won’t take seriously the possibility that $\neg P$. So in all possibilities I am willing to take seriously, P .

By contrast, if I am not certain whether P , I am willing to take seriously the possibility that P , and willing to take seriously the possibility that $\neg P$.

- $\Diamond P$ = it is possible/it might be that P
- $\Box P$ = it is necessary/it must be that P = BP

Since if I am confident that P , I (at the very least) take it seriously:

$$\Box P \not\models \Diamond P;$$

alternatively, if P is true in *all* possibilities I take seriously, it is true in *some*, but not vice versa.

Similarly,

$$\Box P \not\models \neg \Diamond \neg P$$

When I am uncertain whether P : $\Diamond P \wedge \Diamond \neg P$.

2 Luck and uncertainty

What we regard as a matter of luck has to do with what we are allowing ourselves to be certain about:

B: Joe should buy a lottery ticket for a change: maybe he’ll get lucky and pay me back my fifty bucks.

A: Actually this time he did buy one.

B: Good. Any idea what happened?

A: Well, he won.

B: Wow, that *was* lucky.

A: Well, Joe’s brother-in-law is in charge of the lottery: I think they fixed it.

B: Ah, so not just lucky!

A: I wouldn’t be so sure about that. I’ve heard rumors Joe’s brother-in-law is not so smart.

B: So maybe he was lucky ...

C: Yeah, I’ve worked with the guy: I wouldn’t trust him to fix a light bulb.

B: Sounds like Joe got lucky after all!

This table represents five stages in the conversation: initially B's opinion is that Joe did not have a ticket; he believes Joe did not win; and he thinks that *whether* Joe won was not just a matter of luck. His views then evolve as follows ...

.	Opinion	Win?	Luck?
1.	No ticket	No	No
2.	A ticket	?	Yes
3.	+ Won	Yes	Yes
4.	+ Fixed	Yes	No
5.	+ Inept	Yes	Yes

Note the following:

- a. These two things are independent: (i) B's view on what Joe's status is; (ii) B's view on whether Joe's status is a matter of luck.

There are six ways of choosing from {No, ?, Yes} on the first question and {No, Yes} on the second, of which we see four in the table; try to come up with examples of the other pairs.

- b. Whether B thinks Joe's status is a matter of luck evolves with his underlying opinions.

When B changes his mind between (1) and (2), this flips his view on whether luck was involved; then as he adds information in (3) to (6), his view runs through all three possibilities.

This supports the following idea: claiming that whether P is a matter of luck is expressing uncertainty about whether any relevant facts imply that P .

- Let A consist of all facts one takes to be relevant. Then:

It is a matter of luck whether P

$\dashv\vdash$ Assuming only that A : $\Diamond P \wedge \Diamond \neg P$.

3 Truth by luck

When we say that S 's belief that P is true by luck, we mean this. Where A consists of the relevant facts (including that $B_S P$), assuming only that A : $\Diamond P \wedge \Diamond \neg P$. (Note that the uncertainty here is *our* uncertainty, not S 's uncertainty.)

Some examples:

1. Smith believes on the basis of seeing Jones mendaciously bragging about having bought his leased Ford that (Jones owns a Ford \vee Brown is in Barcelona).

Let the relevant facts be solely those concerning Jones's mendacity and Smith's interaction with Jones, together with other 'default' assumptions about the course of things. These facts include that Jones does not own a Ford; accordingly (Jones owns a Ford \vee Brown is in Barcelona) only if Brown is in Barcelona.

But nothing in these facts supports certainty that Brown is in Barcelona. So Smith's belief could be true only by luck.

2. Roz believes, on the basis of seeing a image of a vase in a mirror that obscures location L_1 , that there is a vase in L_1 .

Let the relevant facts be solely those concerning the mirror setup and Roz's encounter with it, together with other 'default' assumptions about the course of things.

Nothing in these facts supports certainty that there is a vase in L_1 . So Roz's belief could be true only by luck.

3. Jeweler Susan believes, on the basis of pulling the one diamond out of a bag containing 19 amazing fakes, that the stone she is examining is a diamond.

Let the relevant facts be solely those concerning Susan's expertise and the fact that she is carefully examining a stone pulled from a bag containing one diamond and 19 amazing fakes, together with other 'default' assumptions about the course of things.

Nothing in these facts supports certainty that Susan is examining a diamond. So her belief could be true only by luck.

One question is: what is so special about *these* facts that makes them 'relevant'? Why isn't it 'relevant' that Brown is in Barcelona, or that the stone Susan is examining is a diamond?

To see an answer to this question let's consider my 'authority semantics'.

4 Luck and authority

One view is that $K_S P$ is an instruction to accept P on S 's authority. Sometimes we don't care whether S is just lucky that P is true (Bullwinkle). But a lot of the time we do. Why?

Stability

If I represent someone as an authority on a certain issue, I generally want their opinion on it to be relatively *stable*: I want other people to be able to learn that they are an authority for quite some time and go to get their opinion. But if there are facts that someone could easily learn which would make their opinion go away, this can't be assured.

1. Smith could easily learn that Jones is lying about the ownership of the Ford. If he does, his belief that (Jones owns a Ford \vee Brown is in Barcelona) will go away.
2. Roz could easily learn that there is a mirror obscuring L_1 from her. If she does, her belief that there is a vase in L_1 will go away.
3. Susan could eventually learn that most of the stones in the bag are fake. If she does, her belief that the initial stone was a diamond would go away.

Cooperative reasoning

Often when I endorse someone's authority about a certain issue, I am interested collaborating with them concerning that issue (or inducing my friends to do so): in reasoning about related questions to learn more truths, or in acting on the basis of their belief to attain certain goals. But if there are facts that make trouble for this, this can't be assured.

1. My friend might ask Smith questions about Jones's debt load. Smith would give a false opinion about this.
2. My friend might ask Roz to bring them a vase. Roz would bump into the mirror.

3. My friend might ask Susan to estimate the value of all the stones in the bag. Susan would give a false opinion about this.

Authority and relevance

In general, the facts that I regard as 'relevant' in assessing whether someone's belief is merely luckily true are those which I might regard as confounding my purposes in assigning someone the status of an authority: the person at issue might learn the fact and abandon the belief; or some unsuspecting party might be frustrated in their aims in cooperating with the person in light of the fact.

5 Goldman

Goldman's view

- (i) S perceptually-knows that P iff the fact that P causes S 's belief that P in the way characteristic of perception;
- (ii) S theoretically-knows that P iff, for some fact that S perceptually-knows, S has reconstructed the way that fact causes P ;
- (iii) otherwise S doesn't know that P .

Causation and luck

Lefty and Righty both draw $5\clubsuit$ from a standard deck. Why? Three possibilities:

1. Some fact caused Lefty to draw $5\clubsuit$ and also caused Righty to draw $5\clubsuit$;
2. The fact that Lefty drew $5\clubsuit$ caused Righty to draw $5\clubsuit$ (or vice versa);
3. It was just luck.

In either of the first or second cases, it was not just luck that they both drew $5\clubsuit$; as we have seen, by this we mean that there are some relevant facts such that, assuming only them, we can be certain that each would draw $5\clubsuit$. For example:

1. Lakshmi told each of them to draw $5\clubsuit$; each of them does what Lakshmi says; conditions are otherwise normal.
If so, we no longer take seriously the possibility that one of them would fail to draw $5\clubsuit$.
2. Righty wanted his card to match Lefty's and sought to do so in light of good information; conditions are otherwise normal.
If so, then given also that Lefty drew $5\clubsuit$, we no longer take seriously the possibility that one of them would fail to draw $5\clubsuit$.

The 'cause' in each case (Lakshmi's command; Lefty's drawing the $5\clubsuit$) is part of what we consider relevant in establishing certainty that the effect (each having drawn $5\clubsuit$) occurs.

In the third case, we find no relevant facts that would make us certain that each draws $5\clubsuit$; this is what we mean when we say their draws were 'random'. Hence the draw is just luck.

Causation and truth by luck

Suppose we are told that Roz's belief that there is a vase at L_1 , a nearby location straight ahead of her, is 'caused in the normal perceptual way' by seeing a vase in L_1 . In Goldman's paper, this is supposed to make us certain that Roz's belief is not just true by luck.

But something weird is happening here:

- ' P causes $B_S P$ ' is supposed to mean that, once we know that P , in light of other assumptions we are making, we can be certain that $B_S P$.
- By contrast, what ' $B_S P$ is not just true by look is supposed to mean that, in light of other assumptions we are making, we can be certain that P .

The order of reasoning is reversed! Since a conditional and its converse are not ordinarily equivalent, how does Goldman think the appeal to causation is supposed to help?

I think we are supposed to reason like this:

Well, take it as given that $B_R V$. And take it as given that this belief was caused in the normal way. Reasoning backward, do I find any scenario which might leave me uncertain whether V ? Well, if the belief was caused in the normal way, at some time earlier, there was vase-like light carrying the information that V entering Roz's eyes. And at some time earlier, there was vase-like light carrying V on the way there in a straight line. And at some time earlier, there was vase-like light carrying V on the way *there* in a straight line. ... This light had to have come from somewhere; L_1 is straight ahead

of her; and under normal circumstances the only way for such light to be produced is by a vase in L_1 . So there was a vase in L_1 .

Of this much we can be certain. So Roz's belief was not just luckily true.

Notice that when there is an interposed mirror, at some point during the '...', we stop saying that the light in question was moving in a straight line. This kills the reasoning to the conclusion that there was a vase in L_1 . We can then be uncertain whether there is a vase in L_1 .

Luck and causation are subjective

Problem: causation in the normal way is not enough to prevent luck.

Take it as given that Susan the diamond-identifier believes that she is holding a diamond. And take it as given that this belief was caused in the normal way. As above, under normal circumstances, this belief results only if she is holding a diamond. But we are not given that circumstances are normal: under the circumstances we are actually considering, we need to include the possibility of the belief being caused by an undetectable fake. If we are additionally given that Susan drew the stone in her hand from a bag containing 19 fakes and one diamond, we are uncertain whether Susan is holding a diamond or a fake.

So we cannot be certain that Susan is holding a diamond. Her belief was just true by luck.

Note that this uncertainty could be dissipated if we additionally take it as given that the 19 fakes remain in the bag, or if we choose to ignore the fact that the diamond came from a bag holding 19 fakes. If we did, we would conclude that Susan's belief is not just true by luck.

What we are willing to take for granted will influence our judgments about what was due to luck and what was not.

But what explains what we are or aren't willing to take for granted? One hypothesis is that this is due to our purposes in treating people as authoritative on various issues. But that obviously will not help the veritist.

For that matter, the concept of causation has a significant subjective component. If you examine any history of causation with sufficient closeness you will find junctures where things went the way they went for no apparent reason. Zoom in closely enough and the appearance of causation goes away. So our willingness to ascribe causality is a matter of what we choose to ignore.

Other problems for Goldman

1. Problems with data

- (a) Gives the wrong verdict on the Bullwinkle case
- (b) Is incapable of generating a certain legitimate verdict on the diamond case (it predicts only that she doesn't know, not that she does)
- (c) The forest fire case is odd: if people reading the paper with no problems set up a relief fund, then are people who read the paper with the problems making a mistake when they contribute to it? If they *really* don't know there is a forest fire, the answer would be yes; but 'yes' seems like a weird answer.
- (d) In cases of testimony we have plenty of knowledge even though we often have no real ability 'reconstruct' the chain of communication leading from the initial fact to the most recent report.

2. Problems with the logic of knowledge

- (a) Why are P and KP equivalent?
- (b) Why does $K_S P$ commit me to KP ?

Maybe there are answers here but I would like to know what they are.

3. It's not really a 'causal' account.

Suppose A comes to know that B had a happy childhood by observing B's well-balanced lifestyle. For Goldman, A needs to 'reconstruct' the way B's childhood led to B's lifestyle. But B's lifestyle is, perhaps, a matter of free choice. And if so, nothing 'caused' him to adopt it.

The same is true for chains of testimony. When someone accepts someone else's report on a certain matter, they are, perhaps, free also not to accept it. Nothing 'causes' them to do so.

So Goldman's theory is not really a 'causal' theory.

4. Worries about 'reconstruction'

- (a) Is the account circular? The 'reconstruction' of the history needs to be knowledgeable. Maybe this just shows that the account is 'recursive': in such a case I plug in how one came to know the reconstruction, and then keep repeating this every time a knowledgeable reconstruction shows up again. But why suppose this will ever 'bottom out'?
- (b) The account is incomplete. If one 'theoretically-knows' that P , the belief that P is caused by some more direct evidence and a reconstruction of how P led to the direct evidence. But caused how? What if I never consciously consider both at the same time, but due to a brain glitch caused by my believing both I wind up believing P ? To prevent calling that 'knowledge' we would need some notion of 'good inference'.