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Commentary on Douglas Walton and David Godden: “Redefining Knowledge in a Way Suitable for Argumentation Theory”

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The authors set out two of the more common definitions of knowledge and argue that there are problems with attempts to apply these accounts of knowledge in argumentation theory. The problems suggest to them that a pragmatic approach to conceiving knowledge in argumentation might be more promising.

COMMENTS

(1) One of the accounts they consider defines knowledge as true belief plus something else; propositional knowledge is some form of “good true belief” - for example, “rationally-held true belief”. This account, the authors hold, seems too restrictive to explain the actual role of knowledge in argumentation and inquiry. The truth condition is problematic: it impedes the role that knowledge can play in the process of argumentation. Consider the reason-giving role that knowledge plays in schemes like arguments from expert opinion:

If the opinion of an expert is only acceptable when her opinion can independently be shown to be true, then there is no need to accept the opinion on the basis of the expert’s authority. Rather, one should accept the opinion on whatever grounds one used to independently verify its truth.

This objection assumes that if truth is a condition for propositional knowledge, then an expert’s opinion is acceptable only when it can independently be shown to be true. The authors do not argue for this assumption. Is the assumption true? (1) The alethic condition for knowledge is a truth condition for knowledge claims, not for acceptability claims (i.e., claims of the form “S’s opinion that *p* is acceptable”, or claims of the more precise form “S’s opinion that *p* is acceptable for X at time *t*”). (2) A proponent of the alethic condition for knowledge need not hold that to be acceptable the opinion of an expert must be true, for she can acknowledge that a claim which it is reasonable to accept (and which is in this sense acceptable), given the evidence for it, may be false. But if she is free to say this, then, *a fortiori*, she is free to say that to be acceptable an expert’s opinion need not be independently shown to be true.

The authors have a second objection to a “good true belief” (GTB) account of knowledge, namely:

[G]iven that the agents in argumentation are epistemically, cognitively and rationally finite and fallible, it is not reasonable to expect every claim to knowledge made at the beginning of the process of argumentation to be manifestly or demonstrably true prior to inquiry.

But a proponent of a GTB account of knowledge need not deny this. She merely proposes a set of truth conditions for knowledge claims; she does not say, nor is she committed by her account of knowledge to saying, that a knowledge claim made at the beginning of a process of argumentation will be true, or, then, that it will be “manifestly or demonstrably true prior to inquiry”.

As an alternative to the two accounts of knowledge they consider, the authors propose a pragmatic approach on which “‘knowledge is defeasible, meaning that a proposition now known may later be refuted (defeated as knowledge)’ ... thus allowing for retraction in the process of inquiry, investigation, and discovery.”

Walton proposes a pragmatic model of rationality and its attendant account of knowledge. On the pragmatic model of epistemic rationality, a group of interacting agents is collecting data in a search for the truth of a matter they are investigating. They verify or falsify hypotheses by testing them against data. As the search for knowledge continues, some hypotheses become better and better supported by evidence, but some previously accepted hypotheses are falsified and so have to be given up. There will be an established standard of proof (whose content will depend on the type of investigation) “that enables the investigation to determine whether a proposition can be accepted as proved or not”. So far, there is nothing for a GTB theorist to disagree with. But the authors go on to say:

A proposition rightly said to be known to be true at a given point in the investigation could later turn out to be proved to be false.... In this model, a particular proposition might rightly be classified as knowledge at one point in the investigation, whereas at a later point, the same proposition might turn out to be no longer classified as knowledge. In general, whether the proposition is rightly said to be knowledge or not depends on its rational acceptance, given the evidence then for it, as balanced against the evidence then against it, at that point in the investigation.

A GTB theorist would not agree that a proposition rightly said to be known to be true at a given point in an investigation could later turn out to be proved to be false. If the proposition is said at $t1$ to be known to be true, but at a later time is proved to be false, it was not rightly said at $t1$ to be known to be true, for it was then false though it had not yet been proved to be. Or so a GTB theorist would say. She could, however, also say that a proposition might *justifiably* be said at $t1$ to be known to be true, given the evidence then for it as balanced against the evidence then against it, but might later be proved to be false.

On Walton’s pragmatic approach, by contrast, knowledge does not require truth. For if it did, then a proposition could not rightly be classified as knowledge at some point in an investigation if at a later point it is proved to be false. Yet Walton’s account does not divorce knowledge from truth, for on his pragmatic model of rationality the search for knowledge is a search for truth and in the search process hypotheses get verified or falsified. Furthermore, falsifying a proposition that was earlier rightly said to be knowledge defeats the proposition’s status as knowledge. Now one might wonder how this can be if knowledge does not require truth. But Walton’s view is not that a

proposition is rightly said at *t1* to be knowledge only if it is true (or not false), but that it is rightly then said to be knowledge only if it has not then *been shown to be false* – i.e., *falsified*. If its status as knowledge is later defeated, this is because it is later falsified. But we might ask: how can it be that showing the proposition to be false has the consequence that its status as knowledge is defeated, but showing it to be, say, widely disbelieved does not? And we might be tempted to answer: to show a proposition to be false is to show that it fails to satisfy a condition that a proposition must satisfy to be knowledge, namely the condition of being true; whereas to show that a proposition is widely disbelieved is not to show that it fails to satisfy a condition that a proposition must satisfy to be knowledge. But for Walton it is the showing of a proposition to be false, not its being false, that defeats its earlier status as knowledge. On his account, a proposition, though false, can be knowledge at *t1* but cannot be knowledge at a later time if it is then *shown* to be false. The question we should ask is whether we need an account of this sort in order to get the result that the authors want – an account of knowledge that is satisfactory for argumentation theory.

Consider what a GTB theorist might say. A proposition, *p*, may be *justifiably* said to be knowledge at some point in an investigation, but this *knowledge claim* – i.e., the claim that *p* is knowledge – may be defeated at a later point in the investigation by *p*'s being falsified. If the claim is defeated, then, a GTB theorist will say, *p* wasn't knowledge at the earlier point in the investigation, even if it was justifiably then said to be.

(2) The authors say that knowledge can play at least three roles in argumentation. Supposing that this is so, can a GTB theorist accommodate these roles?

Role 1: Knowledge is often the starting place for argumentation. That is, argumentation commonly begins from premises or shared commitments that are known. A GTB theorist needn't deny this, but would say that argumentation may begin from shared commitments that are *taken* to be known but are mistakenly so taken. Rather than say that knowledge is often the starting place for argumentation, a GTB theorist might prefer to say that *knowledge claims* are often the starting place for argumentation. The authors will not be impressed, for they say:

[W]hat argumentation requires is a concept of knowledge that allows items of knowledge to be identified [i.e., rightly identified as knowledge, I take them to mean] at the beginning of a process of inquiry, even if this identification is only tentative and subject to retraction as the process of inquiry proceeds.

But here I think the authors are begging the question against a GTB theorist. A GTB theorist could say that argumentation requires a concept of knowledge that allows propositions to be *justifiably* identified as knowledge (and thus justifiably taken to be part of the inquirers' knowledge-base) at the beginning of a process of inquiry, "even if this identification is only tentative and subject to retraction as the process of inquiry proceeds." Why does argumentation require a concept of knowledge that allows propositions to be *rightly, as distinct from justifiably*, identified as knowledge at the beginning of a process of inquiry? The authors don't say, and this is why I think they beg the question against a GTB theorist.

Role 2: Knowledge can be the desired end-state of argumentation. Argumentation that aims at the discovery of the truth of a matter implicitly aims at knowledge. A GTB theorist won't disagree.

Role 3: Knowledge can play a reason-giving role in argumentation. That is, premises asserting that a certain claim is known, or that an agent is in a position to know some claim, can be used as a reason for the acceptability of the claim itself or some other claim. Again, a GTB theorist won't disagree, but she would say that a premise asserting that a certain claim is known, or that an agent is in a position to know some claim, may be false, though justifiably believed. This being so, a GTB theorist might prefer to say not just that knowledge can play a reason-giving role in argumentation, but that so can premises that are justifiably but mistakenly taken to be knowledge.

(3) The authors hold that knowledge must have certain qualities in order to fulfil its functions in argument. (1) The knowledge states of rational agents (i.e., arguers) can be incomplete; rational agents are cognitively limited – e.g., they can forget things they once knew. (2) They have finite reasoning abilities: for example, they can't be expected to know all of the implications of their current knowledge state or to detect every inconsistency in some knowledge-base. (3) Knowledge claims can be based on defeasible support. This fact, and the fact that knowers are epistemically limited, leads to the idea that knowledge claims are themselves defeasible. Agents can make a legitimate claim to knowledge and yet be wrong. Hence the standard of certainty does not seem appropriate for all claims to knowledge. A GTB theorist can agree with (1). She can also agree with (2)'s claim that rational agents have finite reasoning abilities and with the point that rational agents can't be expected to know all of the implications of their current knowledge state; and she can say that rational agents can't be expected to detect every inconsistency in some set of propositions that they justifiably take to be knowledge. As for (3), it is striking that the authors here speak not of knowledge but of knowledge claims, as I think a GTB theorist would want to do in this context.

(4) So far, then, it does not appear that the authors have shown their pragmatic approach to knowledge to be preferable to a GTB account for the purposes of argumentation theory.

(5) At the end of their paper they say that truth is an objective criterion of knowledge. This is an unexpected remark, given the authors' earlier account of their pragmatic model of knowledge. They add, however, that truth is not "an especially useful criterion in cases where it is not manifest, apprehended, or demonstrable – in short unknown." But a GTB theorist might reply that truth is a most useful criterion of knowledge in such cases precisely because it enables us to say that in such cases we don't have knowledge. And it isn't obvious that this reply isn't satisfactory for the purposes of argumentation theory.

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