

Phil. 270, 1/28: Goldman and the Relevant Alternatives Account of Knowledge

1. Four Stages of DPK: It is handy to divide Goldman's DPK into these 4 stages:

1. Intro & I (pp. 771-778.2): A basic Relevant Alternative account of knowledge
2. 778.3-779.2: Goldman's provisional RA analysis, with a counterfactual account of ruling out (presented at 778.9)
3. Further complications
4. Goldman's account of the significance of his theory

It's fair to say that, in terms of importance to subsequent epistemology: 1 > 4 > 2 > 3

2. Relevant Alternatives (RA): The Basic Idea:

S knows that p iff S has a true belief that p and can rule out all of the relevant alternatives to p

-In this basic form, it seems applicable to necessary truths

-The barn case & RA: 774.7-775.3.

-key "squishy" terms in RA: relevant, rule out (or whatever replacement one uses)

-"alternatives": states of affairs in which p is false or propositions that are contrary to p

-"relevant": serious as opposed to idle (775.8). What makes an alternative relevant? No precise answer—and the term remains in G's analysis throughout the paper.

-Relevant to what? (One suspects: to knowledge.) Nozick/Stine critique & analysis:

predict vs. picture: explain: whether and why we (think we) know in various cases

-key terms for what one must do wrt the relevant alternatives to know acc. to Goldman: rule out (774.9), preclude (774.9), eliminate (775.2) the relevant alternatives; or distinguish or discriminate p from its relevant alternatives (774.7) [can add: tell, discern: [18]: p. 16.5]

-good for analysis? The flipping problem. See G's complaint at 773.8

3. Goldman's Provisional Analysis: at the bottom of p. 778. Basically, it's Basic RA with a counterfactual account of "ruling out": An alternative to p is uneliminated if S would still have believed that p even if that alternative, rather than p, had been the case.

-q is an uneliminated alternative to p for S if S would have believed that p, even if q had been the case

-limited to *non-inferential* perceptual knowledge

-move to counterfactual account of ruling out jeopardizes application to necessary truths

-We will discuss counterfactual conditionals more carefully when we talk about Nozick's theory of knowledge, where they play an even more prominent role.

4. Complications

-The Problem: too restrictive (779.2), as illustrated by Dack the dachshund

-The Real Moral (more general than G's moral): We need a more subtle notion of ruling out on which subjects can count as ruling alternatives in cases like this.

-Goldman sets off to formulate a notion of a "perceptual equivalent"

-another possibility: appeal to degrees of belief:

-revised: q is an uneliminated alternative to p for S if S would have believed that p every bit as confidently as she actually does if q had been the case

-can be illustrated by the (Williamson) case of the underestimator, who nonetheless can rule out that the 2' long pole he sees is more than 20' long [& knows it to be less than 20' long].

5. Contextualism and RA

-contextualism vs. invariantism: Does/can the matter of whether someone can be truthfully said to “know” something vary with the speaker’s context? Cont: yes; Inv: no

-on Invariantism, you always either “simply know” or “simply don’t know” (or maybe it’s “simply indeterminate”): it doesn’t matter who’s talking about you.

-“simply know” that p, on our semi-technical meaning: be such that anybody who is using standard English, whatever their context, will be speaking truthfully if they say that you “know” that p (and will falsely if they say you don’t “know” that p).

-You may sometimes simply know things even if contextualism is true, if you’re in such a good position that you meet all allowable standards for knowledge. But on invariantism, you always either simply know something or simply fail to know it (or, again, perhaps it’s simply indeterminate).

-“simply don’t know”: [you should be able to fill this in]

-contextualism: The standards S must meet in order for A’s assertion “S knows that p” to be true can vary with A’s context. Invariantism is the denial of contextualism. According to the invariantist, while the standards S must meet before we will typically think that S knows, or say that S knows, or even for it to be useful for us to say that S knows *may* vary with context, the standards that S must meet in order for it to be *true* to say that S knows do not so vary.

-invariantist (775.9-776.1) vs. contextualist (776.2-.8) versions of RA (not G’s terms). (We’re skipping the two variants (776.9-777.7) of the contextualist version.) 777.7: Goldman seems to prefer the contextualist version.

-If we’re considering the possibility of contextualist RA, we should restate the basic idea to:

A’s assertion “S knows that p” is true iff S can rule out all the alternatives to p that are relevant given S’s situation and given A’s conversational context.

-Invariantist RA holds that the relevant alternatives are determined just by S’s situation, and don’t depend on A’s context. (RA-Inv would also hold that what counts as “ruling out” doesn’t vary with context.)

-Contextualism: strength of epistemic position and varying epistemic standards

-RA as a way of being more specific – and why (a slight tweak of) the original barn cases seem to show that this won’t work.

6. RA and Skepticism

-777.9: G remains officially neutral, but he’s operationally non-skeptical. His guide to which alternatives are relevant seems to be what we would ordinarily judge or take to be knowledge or relevance. This isn’t skeptic-friendly, since the skeptic holds that our ordinary judgments of knowledge are systematically mistaken.

-RA seems to promise relief from skepticism, with its suggestion that some “idle” alternatives to what we believe are not relevant to whether we know those things

-790.9: G wants to explain both the attractiveness of skepticism and of anti-skepticism (see also 775.2, 775.8)

-Contextualism may be helpful here. Maybe the skeptic manipulates mechanisms that tend to make hard-to-rule-out alternatives relevant?