

MALCOLM ON KNOWLEDGE

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The recent reprinting of Norman Malcolm's "Knowledge and Belief", in somewhat revised form ⁽¹⁾, invites a fresh inspection of his account. The principal claim of the paper (that has an important bearing on the whole of Malcolm's philosophical endeavors) is that there is a "distinction between strong and weak knowledge [that] does not run parallel to the distinction between a priori and empirical knowledge but [that] cuts across it..." ⁽²⁾ I should like to show, as succinctly as possible, that a) Malcolm fails to distinguish consistently between the two alleged kinds of knowledge; b) Malcolm confuses knowledge with belief; c) Malcolm confuses knowledge with the claim that one knows; d) the alleged "strong" sense of "know" is superfluous and misleading (and may, therefore, profitably be rejected). I am concerned to press these points against this very brief paper, because it is, as far as I know, Malcolm's most sustained effort to examine the meaning of "know", because his well-known discussions of certainty and doubt presuppose it, and because he himself, in a new note to "The Verification Argument" ⁽³⁾ draws attention to the strategic importance of the paper.

Consider the following remarks :

"The propositions $2 + 2 = 4$ and $92 \times 16 = 1472$ do not have the same status. There *can* be a demonstration that $2 + 2 = 4$. But a demonstration would be for me (and for any average person. only a curious exercise, a sort of *game*... It does not need a proof..) The case is different with the proposition that $92 \times 16 = 1472$.

⁽¹⁾ *In Knowledge and Certainty* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963). All page references are to this edition.

⁽²⁾ P. 71.

⁽³⁾ Pp. 56-57.

We take an interest in the demonstration (calculation) because that proposition *depends* upon its demonstration.

“There is a correspondence between this dualism in the logical status of mathematical propositions and the two senses of ‘know’. When I use ‘know’ in the weak sense I am prepared to let an investigation (demonstration, calculation) determine whether the something that I claim to know is true or false. When I use ‘know’ in the strong sense I am not prepared to look upon anything as an *investigation*; I do not concede that anything whatsoever could prove me mistaken; I do not regard the matter as open to any *question*; I do not admit that my proposition could turn out to be false, that any future investigation could refute it or cast doubt on it” (4).

It is, on the face of it, curious to hold that there are two distinct senses of “know” that apply (apparently) exclusively to propositions as similar as that $2 + 2 = 4$ and that $92 \times 16 = 1472$. This could be made out simply *if* one construed “know” in terms of psychological or autobiographical certainty. And indeed, the use of such locutions as “I am prepared to let”, “I am not prepared to look upon”, “I do not regard”, “I do not admit” — as well as Malcolm’s deliberate choice of the term “attitude” to fix a necessary condition for the “strong” sense of “know” (5) strongly suggests this view. On the other hand, Malcolm explicitly denies that he intends his remarks to be taken as “autobiographical”, insists that they “are meant to throw light on the common concepts of evidence, proof, and disproof.” (6) He is wrong, however, in thinking that they do throw light on these common concepts, and he cannot consistently deny that his thesis is at bottom “autobiographical”.

The argument designed to show that “the concepts of proof, disproof, doubt, and conjecture *require* us to take this attitude” rests entirely on the grounds that “In order for it to be possible that any statements about physical things should *turn out to be false* it is necessary that some statements about physical things *cannot* turn out to be false.” (7) As Malcolm rightly says: “One statement about physical things *turned out to be false* only because you made

(4) Pp. 63-64.

(5) Cf. P. 68, new footnote.

(6) P. 68.

(7) P. 69.

sure of another statement about physical things" (8). But the statement of the grounds is a tautology and the conclusion does not follow from it: it applies just as well to the "weak" sense of "know". Malcolm has confused here the correlative nature of the concepts of truth and falsity and the alleged logical necessity for admitting the "strong" sense of "know". It is logically possible to subscribe to the "weak" sense of "know" alone *and* to admit that "it is impossible that *every* statement about physical things *could* turn out to be false." (9) In a sense Malcolm himself admits this, since (in the long passage quoted) he employs the "strong" sense of "know" *in a restricted context* ("for me", "for any average person"). It is not the proposition $2 + 2 = 4$ that calls for the "strong" sense of "know" but only that proposition asserted "by me" or by "any average person". That is, even Malcolm cannot hope to *enumerate* quite particular propositions that call for the "strong" sense of "know". One must admit that "*every* statement about physical things" (taking "every" distributively) "could turn out to be false", but that "*every* statement about physical things" (taking "every" collectively) "*could* [not] turn out to be false". Or, at any rate, nothing in the argument thus far requires us to deny this. The alleged grounds point not to questions of knowledge at all but only to the logical relationship between truth and falsity.

The argument regarding arithmetic propositions is essentially repeated for empirical propositions. Malcolm asks anyone willing to assert any of the following to "try to imagine the possibility that it is false" (10):

- (i) The sun is about ninety million miles from the earth.
- (ii) There is a heart in my body.
- (iii) Here is an ink-bottle.

Corresponding to the former argument, his argument here is that (i) and (ii) call, in context, for the "weak" sense of "know", but that (iii) calls for the "strong" sense. Once again, we must observe it is curious to hold that there are two distinct senses of "know" that obtain, in context, for three such similar propositions. Proposition (iii) looks suspiciously like a sense-datum statement and may be

(8) P. 69.

(9) P. 65.

(10) P. 65.

supposed to be incorrigible — and, therefore, to require the “strong” sense of “know”. Malcolm denies this explicitly: “I wish to make it clear that my statement ‘Here is an ink-bottle’ is strictly about physical things and not about ‘sensations’, ‘sense-data,’ or ‘appearances.’” (11) Surely, on the basis of his reasonable concessions regarding propositions (i) and (ii), there must be contexts in which proposition (iii) can be doubted and proved false — that is, there must be contexts in which the “weak” sense of “know” is called for. The sole possibility open to Malcolm (it is the one he wants) is that *if*, in the appropriate context, *I assert* that here is an ink-bottle, the “strong” sense of “know” is called for. The trouble is that, if the sense-datum view is waived, the meaning of “know” *must be at bottom autobiographical*; furthermore, against his protestations, it *is* autobiographical in the development of his own instances. As Malcolm pursues proposition (iii), whatever might occur that would incline others to suppose I was under hallucination, that the ink-bottle did not exist, and the like (12), I should not be logically bound to admit any such “future experience or investigation” as providing evidence that might disprove my statement (13).

As a matter of fact, Malcolm says that, under the circumstances, “no future experience or investigation could prove to me that I am mistaken” (14); the phrase “to me” suggests an autobiographical interpretation. Also, in the very context in which he denies such a construction, Malcolm says that “my assertion that I should regard nothing as evidence that there is no ink-bottle here... describes my *present* attitude toward the statement that here is an ink-bottle.” (15) But surely, what *my attitude to my own statement* may be is both autobiographical and irrelevant to the question of whether I can be said to know that “here is an ink-bottle”. The evidence Malcolm disclaims as irrelevant *is* relevant — where questions of knowledge are concerned — unless the “strong” sense of “know” reduces to belief, in an autobiographical sense, or unless (which Malcolm rejects) the

(11) P. 71. It is this consideration, in fact, that renders Malcolm’s “Direct Perception” irrelevant to our present question.

(12) Pp. 66-67.

(13) Pp. 67-68.

(14) P. 68.

(15) P. 68.

proposition reduces to an incorrigible sense-datum statement. If I understand Malcolm correctly, it would never be possible to *prove* that another suffered hallucination, though one might *persuade* him to change his belief⁽¹⁶⁾. For, if he held to the “strong” sense of “know” (and, apparently, *he* has the option of declaring that he does), no would-be evidence that I or anyone else might posit would *logically* raise any legitimate doubts for him. But this is both a confusion between knowledge and belief and, given an unacceptable consequence, a false doctrine.

The autobiographical interpretation of the “strong” sense of “know” can be strengthened. Malcolm holds that, though with regard to proposition (ii), “I do *now* admit that certain future occurrences would disprove” it, no “imaginable future occurrence would be considered by me *now* as proving that there is not an ink-bottle here⁽¹⁷⁾.” In disclaiming this interpretation, he links his account to the correlative nature of truth and falsity — which, we have already seen, will not serve his purpose. His final explanation of the “strong” sense is given in a newly written passage⁽¹⁸⁾. There, he says :

When I say that I know something to be so, using “know” in the strong sense, it is unintelligible *to me* (although perhaps not to others) to suppose that anything could prove that it is not so and, therefore, that I do not know it⁽¹⁹⁾.

But this is a complete muddle. For one thing, “unintelligible *to me* (although perhaps not to others)” *certainly* makes the “strong” sense of “know” autobiographical, *certainly* confuses knowledge and belief, *certainly* does not permit the “strong” sense to be construed as a counterpart sense to the “weak” sense. For another, Malcolm has here confused the notions of knowing something and of claiming to know something. For, if I believe that nothing can prove what I believe to be true to be actually false, I am entitled to *claim* to know that it is true. *But this has nothing to do with whether what I claim to be true is true and it has nothing to do with whether there are conceivable grounds for doubting and disproving what I claim to be*

⁽¹⁶⁾ P. 68.

⁽¹⁷⁾ P. 68.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Cf. p. 71.

⁽¹⁹⁾ P. 72.

true. It is purely gratuitous that, in claiming to know something, I suppose — in addition to *believing* that nothing could disprove my claim — that there is a sense of “know” in which “no imaginable future occurrence” *would logically* serve to cast reasonable doubt on the truth of what I claim to be true. Consequently, when Malcolm says that, “*in my own case*”, I cannot both be using “know” in the “strong” sense and “envisage a possibility what that I say to be true should turn out to be not true” (20), that not being able to have “this conjunction of thoughts... is a logical and not a psychological fact” (21), he fails to see that the concept of claiming to know is adequate to his purpose, accommodates usage, and does not require the invention of a distinct sense of “know” that has not yet been independently supported.

In fact, Malcolm had earlier conceded, with respect to proposition (ii) that, under circumstances of pertinent evidence, I “should consider to be false what I now regard as an absolutely certainty” (22). The question remains why, having conceded this, Malcolm thinks the same concession is *not required* for proposition (iii). There, he clearly saw the difference between belief and knowledge and the irrelevance of his “present attitude” to his having knowledge (as distinct from his belief and his entitlement to claim knowledge). But, curiously and altogether indefensibly, he makes an aboutface in speaking of proposition (iii). The only relevant reason seems to be his mistaking the conceptual connection between truth and falsity for a logical necessity to admit the “strong” sense of “know”.

We may also notice that Malcolm is prepared to admit that “if I make an assertion of the form ‘I know that *p*’ it does not follow that *p*, whether or not I am using ‘know’ in the strong sense.” (23) He is, of course, quite right about the difference between knowing and claiming to know. But it does not seem possible for him to admit the difference, *if* he holds to the “strong” sense of “know”. For, holding to the “strong” sense, he must say that *nothing* that the future might bring could ever count as evidence against [an

(20) P. 72.

(21) P. 72.

(22) P. 66.

(23) P. 72.

asserted] proposition.” (24) Hence, if anyone sincerely asserts a proposition, in the “strong” sense of “know”, it is *logically* impossible that anyone could disprove it; that is, contrary to Malcolm’s own view, if “I make an assertion of the form ‘I know that *p*,’ ” in the “strong” sense of “know”, it *does* follow that *p*. Malcolm, therefore, is committed to defending contradictory views: but to distinguish between knowing and claiming to know is incompatible with the “strong” sense of “know”; and the “strong” sense of ‘know’ makes it impossible for any claimant to be wrong or proved wrong — which is absurd. Also, Malcolm’s final emendation, that, in the “strong” sense of “know”, “it is unintelligible *to me* (although perhaps not to others) to suppose that anything could prove that it is not so and, therefore, that I do not know it” makes questions of knowledge and proof asymmetrical with respect to first- and third-person discourse about “physical things”, works at cross-purposes to the earlier admission of a logical impossibility — since that was supposed to be symmetrical for all discourse, and departs significantly from all ordinary talk about knowledge and belief about physical objects. In a word, the “strong” sense of “know” cannot possibly be a sense of “know” comparable to the “weak” sense of “know”.

I believe Malcolm’s errors stem from his desire to forestall the view, discussed at length in “The Verification Argument”, that “all empirical propositions, including judgments of perception, are merely hypotheses”. (25) He somehow supposes that to defend his thesis, he must provide for the “strong” sense of “know”. I have been arguing, in effect, that, if this is so, the thesis falls. On the other hand, I have been suggesting that the possibility of knowledge, certainty, and reasonable doubt are all able to be accommodated by the “weak” sense of “know” alone. For one thing, the “weak” sense is necessarily compatible with the correlative nature of the concepts of truth and falsity; and for another, the “strong” sense does not preserve this relationship any more effectively than the “weak” sense. But more important even than these considerations is that of the propriety of doubt. Malcolm properly asks when may one rea-

(24) P. 62.

(25) P. 65.

sonably question the assertion, for instance, that "the drawer is empty". "Not," he says, "if the drawer lies open before your eyes." The question "is the prelude to a search. What search can there be when the emptiness of the drawer confronts you?" (26) Now, the "weak" sense of "know" accommodates *all* inquiries of *this* sort, whether regarding the truth of empirical propositions or of a priori propositions. But when the search is over, when *all* reasonable doubts have been put to rest, one cannot (by hypothesis) raise a reasonable doubt. The "weak" sense of "know" cannot serve us here. *But there is no sense of "know" required.* For, what Malcolm calls the "strong" sense of "know" is nothing more or less than the condition of satisfying the "weak" sense of "know" and of being unable to conceive of any other reasonable doubts about a given assertion. It is simply trivially true that, if *all* reasonable doubts are satisfied, and if one may be said to know what could antecedently have been reasonably doubted, then one knows what one knows "in the strong sense" that "nothing that the future might bring could ever count as evidence against the proposition". But this is a superfluous sense of "know" as well as a misleading sense, since, for one thing, it adds nothing to the "weak" sense of "know" except "autobiographical" considerations and, for another, it suggests wrongly that there *are* empirical propositions about physical objects that cannot be reasonably doubted. (27).

I should add that to challenge the "strong" sense of "know" is not at all to support the "weak" sense. The truth is Malcolm offers no fully developed account of this sense and is primarily concerned to press the "strong" sense. I have, accordingly, confined my remarks to the "strong" sense.

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(26) P. 69.

(27) Cf. p. 69.