THE PRAGMATIC PARADOX OF KNOWLEDGE

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Dr. A suspects that his patient, B, has cancer. He consults his medical distionary for a list of necessary and sufficient conditions for somebody's having cancer, and finds the following curious definition: 'A patient has cancer iff 1. he has a tumor of type A, and 2. he behaves in way B, and 3. he has cancer'. This definition can be interpreted in two ways. Either condition 3 is redundant, and one has cancer iff one fulfils conditions 1 and 2 — in which case condition 3 would also be truistically fulfilled. In this case the definition is redundantly verbose, but it is not circular. But this definition can also be interpreted to mean that the fulfilment of conditions 1 and 2 alone does not suffice for the ascription of cancer to a patient. We cannot justifiably ascribe having of cancer to anyone unless we establish that all three conditions are fulfilled. In this case the definition is clearly circular: one has to find out whether the patient has cancer in order to find out whether the patient has cancer. The only plausible interpretation of the alleged definition under these conditions would be that it is not a definition at all but a statement of the irreducibility of the ascription of cancer. Having cancer, we would say, is a simple property, and it is impossible to specify a list of necessary and sufficient conditions for having cancer which would not include the very property we wish to define, i.e., having cancer.

This was a case of logical circularity. Now, I do not maintain that the accepted definition of knowledge is logically circular. But I do maintain that it is *pragmatically* circular, i.e., that necessarily it becames self defeatingly circular in self application. That is, its relation to the above case of circularity is like the relation of 'p, but I do not believe that p' or 'I cannot make any statement in English' to 'p and not p'.

The standard definition of knowledge is that I know that p if and only if p, and I believe that p, and I have adequate evidence (or: I am justified in believing) that p. For short, Kxp iff 1. p, and 2. Bxp, and 3. Jxp. This definition does not seem circular at all, since Kxp is not one of the conditions for Kxp. Let me, however, try to apply the definition. Suppose I want to know whether it is true that I know that p, i.e., whether I can ascribe Kxp to myself. By the above definition what I have to do is to find out whether the three conditions are met. That is, I have to find out whether p, whether I believe it, and whether I am justified in believing it. However, once I find out the first condition is met, i.e., that p is the case, I know that p: it is impossible for me to ascertain the fact that p without coming to know that p. But if I know that p then 'I know that p' is true, the other two conditions notwithstanding. But if this is the case, how should we understand the standard definition of knowledge ? It now seems to be (as we have seen before, in the doctor's example) either a verbose way of saying that conditions 2 and 3 alone, i.e., belief and adequate evidence, are sufficient conditions for knowledge, or else it is a roundabout way of saying that knowledge is undefinable, i.e., there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for Kxp, and there is no possible analysis of the concept of *knowing that* p.

Let us turn next to 'KxKxp'. The necessary and sufficient conditions for 'KxKxp' being true of *a* are 'Kxp' and 'BxKxp' and 'JxKxp' being true of him. There seem to be no circularity involved. However, suppose that, given a certain p, *a* wishes to know whether indeed K*a*K*a*p. It seems that the only way to find that out is by establishing the truth or falsity of the three conditions enumerated above. Suppose *a* finds out that the first conditions is indeed fulfilled, i.e., that K*a*p. He can now say, 'I know that 'Kxp' is true of me'; but (assuming *a* knows that he is *a*) this is just another way of saying that K*a*K*a*p. In other words, if 'I know that K*a*p' said by *a* is true, then 'K*a*K*a*p' is true. Hence it is impossible to find out whether 'KxKxp' is true of one by finding out whether the necessary and sufficient conditions for 'KxKxp' being true of one are true of one. The conditions of knowing are therefore pragmatically circular: The relation between KxKxp and Kxp is not a causal one; rather, 'Kxp' was supposed to be part of the analysandum of 'KxKxp'.

But if finding out whether Kxp is both necessary and sufficient for finding out whether KxKxp, then surely Kxp is all the analysis we need to have for KxKxp.

The most significant philosophical use of the above definition of knowledge was its use as an answer to the skeptic, who claims that *if* there is a logical difference between our having evidence for 'p' and 'p' being true, then we can never know that p. The only thing we can possibly know is that we have so much evidence for 'p'; but there always is a logical gap between " 'p' is highly corroborated" and " 'p' is true". But we know that p only if we know that 'p' is true. Hence we can never know that p. The answer to the skeptic took the following form: The skeptic does not deny that it may be the case that p. He also does not deny that we can believe that p, and that we can have adequate evidence for p. If these three conditions are fulfilled, however, then we *know* that p, because, according to the standard definition of knowledge, p and Bxp and Jxp entail Kxp. At first glance it seems that the skeptic can defend his position by saying — "yes, if 'p' is indeed true, i.e., if p is the case, then we do know that p. But we cannot tell whether 'p' is indeed true. Hence although unbeknownst to us it may be true that we know that p, we cannot know that we know that p". The skeptic position is, therefore, in this new version, that although we may know, we may not know that we know. I.e., instead of attacking 'Kxp' he now attacks 'KxKxp'. This argument, however, can be defeated in the same way that the first argument was, since one may establish the possibility of KxKxp in the same way that the possibility of Kxp was established. We have just assumed that Kxp may be the case. It also may be the case that BxKxp, i.e., we may believe that we know that p. Finally we may be justified in believing that we know that p (this follows from 'Jxp' and 'JxBxp' and 'JxJxp' — all three of which, I take it, are unobjectionable). But if Kxp and BxKxp then JxKxp — i.e., we may know that we know, and the skeptic is refuted again. And so can he be refuted on every level.

However, If my previous analysis of the pragmatic circularity of the standard definition of knowledge is correct, then the refutation of the skeptic can itself be refuted. Suppose we want to know whether Kxp is truly ascribable to us. As I have tried to show this cannot be done by using the definition of knowledge, since on this definition we would have to know first whether 'Kxp' is true of us before we come to know that 'Kxp' is true of us — which is absurd. So if we do not know whether 'Kxp' is true of us, and we give the definition of knowledge the interpretation according to which the second and third conditions alone are *not* sufficient conditions for the ascription of knowledge (which is just to say in other words what the skeptic is claiming when he maintains that there is a logical gap between 'p' being corroborated and 'p' being true) then we have no way of finding out whether 'Kxp' is true of us or not.

This does not show that the skeptic is right in his first argument. The skeptic claimed, as we remember, that 'Kxp' is true of us. But that was not proved. The only thing I have so far showed is that if we stand in need of an answer whether 'Kxp' or 'Kxp' is true, then no answer can be given. Hence it would be a mistake to argue with the skeptic that the correct answer is 'Kxp' as it would be a mistake to try to prove or show in any way that 'Kxp' is true.

On the second level, however, the situation is somewhat different, and may be here it is not impossilbe that the skeptic *can* be vindicated. On this level we have tried to find the answer to the question whether 'KxKxp' is or is not true of us. We saw that it was a necessary condition for 'KxKxp' to be true of us that 'Kxp' be true of us. Now, it may be argued that if we want to be justified in ascribing KxKxp to ourselves we must be able to show that Kxp is truly ascribable to us. But as we have just seen this is something we can never do. Although it is not impossible that 'Kxp' is true of us, we cannot ever show that it is. In *showing* that K*a*p *a* cannot use 'K*a*p' as a premise, i.e., *a* cannot assume that he already knows that p is the case. But if *a* does not know whether p or not p is the case *a* cannot use the argument that p is the case as his ground for asserting that K*a*p. For to, say that *a knows* that p is the case is to say that K*a*p, and hence *a*'s grounds for maintaining that p is the case would be *a*'s grounds for maintaining that K*a*p is the case. However, if *a* cannot use the argument that p is the case as his ground for holding that K*a*p, one cannot ever show that K*a*p is the case. Thus if one maintains that we cannot know anything unless we can show it to be the case, we cannot be said, on this basis, to know that we know that anything or other is the case. In other words, if we are never able to find out whether 'Kxp' is or is not true of us, then we *do not know* whether we do or do not know that p. Hence it may be argued that the skeptic is right in saying that 'KxKxp' is true of us (1).

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(1) I have greatly profited from discussions I had on the subject of this paper with my colleagues David Benfield, Ed Erwin and Marshall Spector.