Phil. 159: Epistemology
March 1, 2022

Lecture 11: Nozick's Tracking Theory of Knowledge

I. The Tracking Theory Introduced

Nozick's initial proposal:

> *the tracking theory of knowledge*: S knows P iff:
>
> 1. P is true;
> 2. S believes P;
> 3. if P weren't true, S wouldn't believe P; and
> 4. if P were true, S would believe P.

When all four conditions hold, one's belief in P is said *to track the truth* of P.

indicative conditional: "If P is true, then Q is true." (in symbols: "P ⊃ Q")

subjunctive conditional: "If P were true, then Q would be true." (in symbols: "P → Q")

Two widely held theories of the truth-conditions for these conditionals:

"P ⊃ Q" is true iff it's not the case that P is true and Q is false.

"P → Q" is true iff, in the closest possible world in which P is true, Q is true.

Nozick tentatively proposes a slightly different set of truth-conditions for subjunctive conditionals:

"P → Q" is true iff, in every closest and almost-closest possible world in which P is true, Q is true.

The tracking theory yields intuitively correct verdicts about a number of cases, including the original Gettier cases, the blow-to-the-head case, and the overdetermined-death case.

II. Tracking Skeptical Hypotheses

Consider the following propositions:

P = the proposition *that I'm standing in Emerson 305*

SK = the proposition *that I'm a brain-in-a-vat on Alpha Centauri being led to believe P*

According to Nozick, I know P:

Conditions 1 and 2 are satisfied, since (let's suppose) I believe P, and P is true.

Condition 3 is satisfied, since in the closest and almost-closest worlds in which I'm not standing in Emerson 305, I'm sitting in Emerson 305 (or standing in the hallway, or . . .) and hence don't believe P.

Condition 4 is satisfied, since in the almost-closest worlds in which I'm standing in Emerson 305, I'm standing slightly differently (or in a slightly different spot, or . . .) and hence still believe P.

However, according to Nozick, I don't know ~SK:

Condition 3 is not satisfied, since in the closest and almost-closest worlds in which ~~SK is true, I believe ~SK.

Thus Nozick's tracking theory violates the plausible idea that *knowledge is closed under known entailment*:

Restricted Closure: If you know P, and you know that P entails Q, then you know Q.

However, Nozick thinks of this consequence as a *virtue* of his theory, not a *vice*: he thinks it allows him to explain the pull of skeptical arguments, without conceding the skeptic's conclusion.

III. Modifying the Tracking Theory

The tracking theory, as formulated so far, faces certain counterexamples. Nozick mentions the following:

- *the glance*: "Suppose [a] person only happened to see a certain event . . . . He knows it occurred. Yet if he did not happen to glance that way . . . , he would not believe it, even though it occurred" (p. 258).

- *the grandmother*: "A grandmother sees her grandson is well when he comes to visit; but if he were sick or dead, others would tell her he was well to spare her upset. Yet this does not mean she doesn't know he is well (or at least ambulatory) when she sees him" (p. 259).

In the first of these cases, condition 4 fails, and in the second, condition 3 fails, yet each intuitively counts as a case of knowledge.

Nozick proposes revising his theory to take into account the *method* by which a belief is formed. If we ignore cases in which the subject believes something on the basis of multiple methods, Nozick's revised account is:

> *the tracking theory of knowledge (revised version)*: S knows P iff there is some method M such that:
>
> 1. P is true;
> 2. S believes P via M;
> 3. if P weren't true and S were to use M to arrive at a belief as to whether or not P is true, then S wouldn't believe P via M; and
> 4. if P were true and S were to use M to arrive at a belief as to whether or not P is true, then S would believe P via M.

When M = *the method of glancing in such-and-such a direction*, this handles the first case. And when M = *the method of looking at one's grandson*, it handles the second.

IV. Further Worries for the Tracking Theory

Unfortunately, though, even the revised version of the tracking theory faces problems. Here are a number of (alleged) counterexamples that have been raised:

- *the trash chute*: I drop a trash bag down a chute in my apartment complex. An hour later I presumably know *that the bag is in the basement*. However, if it were not true that the bag is in the basement, this would be because the bag got stuck in the chute (a very rare occurrence). But in that case I would still believe that the bag is in the basement, so condition 3 is not satisfied.

- *the mountain-climbing brain-in-a-vat*: Presumably, I right now know *that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat being led to believe that I'm climbing a mountain*. However, if I were a brain-in-a-vat being led to believe that I'm climbing a mountain, I would believe that I'm not such a brain-in-a-vat, so condition 3 is not satisfied.

- *the lucky glance*: I glance out my window and see Malcolm crossing the street. However, Malcolm very easily could have crossed the street at a spot I can't see from my window. So although it seems that I know *that Malcolm crossed the street*, in several nearby worlds in which that proposition is true and in which I use the same belief-forming method (glancing out my window), I don't believe that Malcolm crossed the street. Thus condition 4 is not satisfied.

- *Kripke's barn*: I'm driving through the countryside and see a red barn. However, it turns out that, although I passed a real barn, there are lots of fake barn facades scattered throughout the countryside. One catch: all of the fake barns are yellow. So I fail condition 3 with respect to the proposition *that I passed a barn* (there are nearby worlds in which I pass a facade instead of a barn, but believe that I passed a barn), but I meet all four conditions with respect to the proposition *that I passed a red barn*. However, this is counterintuitive: either I know both propositions or I know neither, but I don't know one but not the other.