

Lecture 12: Sosa on Safety

I. The Tracking Theory (Recap)

the tracking theory of knowledge (initial version): Subject S knows proposition P if and only if the following four conditions are satisfied:

1. *the truth condition:* P is true;
2. *the belief condition:* S believes P;
3. *the sensitivity condition:* if P weren't true, then S wouldn't believe P;
4. *the adherence condition:* if P were true, then S would believe P.

Let a *P-world* be a possible world in which the proposition P is true. Then if we plug in Nozick's proposed truth-conditions for subjunctive conditionals, the last two conditions become:

the sensitivity condition: In every closest (and almost-closest) \sim P-world, S does not believe P.

the adherence condition: In every closest (and almost-closest) P-world, S believes P.

However, even if we reject possible-world accounts of the truth-conditions of subjunctive conditionals, Nozick's tracking theory might still be true.

II. Nozick vs. Moore vs. the Skeptic

Consider the following propositions:

H = *that I now have hands*

BIV = *that I'm a handless brain-in-a-vat being fed experiences as if I were normally embodied and situated*

The following three claims are individually plausible but jointly inconsistent:

- (i) I know H.
- (ii) I don't know \sim BIV.
- (iii) If I know H, then I know \sim BIV.

Nozick, Moore, and the skeptic propose different ways of resolving this paradox:

the skeptic: (i) is false; (ii) and (iii) are true.

Moore: (ii) is false; (i) and (iii) are true.

Nozick: (iii) is false; (i) and (ii) are true.

Sosa points out that, to resolve the paradox, it's not enough to simply pick one of the three claims and insist that it is false; one also has to explain why that claim seemed so plausible in the first place.

Sosa thinks that both Moore and Nozick have failed in this regard: Moore has not explained the appeal of (ii), and Nozick has not explained the appeal of (iii).

Two other problems that Sosa finds with Nozick's position:

- In arguing for the truth of (ii) and for the falsity of (iii), Nozick appeals to a sensitivity requirement on knowledge, but Sosa thinks this requirement faces various counterexamples.
- Nozick's denial of (iii) forces him to accept *abominable conjunctions*, such as: "I know *that I have hands*, but I don't know *that I'm not a handless brain-in-a-vat being deceived into thinking I have hands*."

An even worse abominable conjunction: "I know (H & \sim BIV), but I don't know \sim BIV."

III. Sosa's Alternative: Better Safe than Sensitive

Sosa insists that sensitivity is not necessary for knowledge, and instead the following must be the case for a subject S to know some proposition P:

the safety condition: If S were to believe P, then P would be true.

Other ways that Sosa glosses the safety condition (p. 281):

- “S would believe that *p* only if it were so that *p*.”
- “S would not believe that *p* without it being the case that *p*.”
- “As a matter of fact, though not necessarily as a matter of strict necessity, not easily would S believe that *p* without it being the case that *p*.”

(Note: in this article Sosa does not take a stand on all of the conditions that are required for knowledge; all he insists on is that the safety condition is one of them.)

The safety condition is *not* equivalent to the sensitivity condition, since subjunctive conditionals—unlike indicative conditionals—do not contrapose:

“ $P \supset Q$ ” is logically equivalent to “ $\sim Q \supset \sim P$ ”

“ $P \rightarrow Q$ ” is *not* logically equivalent to “ $\sim Q \rightarrow \sim P$ ”

Sosa's example of a case in which “ $P \rightarrow Q$ ” is true but “ $\sim Q \rightarrow \sim P$ ” is not:

“If it were the case *that water is flowing from the faucet*, then it would *not* be the case *that water is flowing from the faucet and the main valve is closed*” can be true.

“If it were the case *that water is flowing from the faucet and the main valve is closed*, then it would *not* be the case *that water is flowing from the faucet*” is presumably always false.

Sosa insists that the safety condition has many advantages over the sensitivity condition:

- *first advantage:* According to Sosa, most of the counterexamples to sensitivity being necessary for knowledge are not counterexamples to safety being necessary for knowledge.
- *second advantage:* According to Sosa, the safety condition does not block me from knowing \sim BIV: in the closest and almost-closest worlds in which I believe *that I'm not a handless brain-in-a-vat*, presumably it's true *that I'm not a handless brain-in-a-vat*.

These advantages allow Sosa to defend a more plausible Moorean stance with regards to our inconsistent triad (i), (ii), and (iii) by making the following claims:

- a. Moore is right: (ii) is false, and (i) and (iii) are true.
- b. Safety, not sensitivity, is required for knowledge.
- c. If sensitivity were required for knowledge, (ii) would be true.
- d. The reason we find (ii) so attractive is that—because it is easy to overlook the fact that subjunctive conditionals do not contrapose—we are lulled by the skeptic (and Nozick) into mistakenly thinking that sensitivity, not safety, is required for knowledge.

Some possible worries for Sosa's strategy:

- Is this really a fully convincing account of why (ii) seems so plausible?
- Some of the counterexamples to the sensitivity condition also appear to be counterexamples to the safety condition (for example: Kripke's version of the fake-barn-country case).
- For that reason, Sosa also appears to be committed to some abominable conjunctions (for example: “I know *that I just passed a red barn*, but I don't know *that I just passed a barn*”).

IV. Craig's Complaint

Craig provides an elegant objection to Nozick's (and, by extension, Sosa's) reply to the skeptic.

Let a *skeptical world* be a possible world in which I am subject to a comprehensive and systematic illusion; then Craig argues as follows:

1. If the actual world is a skeptical world, then on Nozick's account of knowledge, the skeptic wins: I don't know that I have hands. [*premise*]
2. So, in order to be able to use Nozick's analysis of knowledge against the skeptic, I must be in a position to assert that the actual world is not a skeptical world. [*from 1*]
3. If I am in a position to assert that the actual world is not a skeptical world, I must have already defeated the skeptic. [*premise*]
4. So, in order to be able to use Nozick's analysis of knowledge against the skeptic, I must have already defeated the skeptic. [*from 2, 3*]

Thus Craig concludes that Nozick's analysis of knowledge is either *impotent* or *redundant* as a weapon against the skeptic: if we *can't* antecedently defeat the skeptic, then an appeal to the analysis is also unable to defeat the skeptic and thus impotent; and if we *can* antecedently defeat the skeptic, then the analysis can also be used to defeat the skeptic, but only redundantly so.

Although Craig's objection certainly seems to be onto something, we need to be very careful when evaluating whether 2 really follows from 1.

What does it take to "be in a position to assert something"? Here is one currently popular proposal:

knowledge as the norm of assertion: I am in a position to assert P only if I know P.

To simplify our discussion, let us assume this account. Then we can rewrite 2 as:

- 2'. So, in order to be able to use Nozick's analysis of knowledge against the skeptic, I must know that the actual world is not a skeptical world.

But this can't be right, because Nozick holds that we *don't* know that the actual world is not a skeptical world. So it would appear that we are better off reformulating 2' as follows (and making corresponding changes in 1 and 3):

- 2''. So, in order to be able to use Nozick's analysis of knowledge against the skeptic, I must know that I satisfy all four of Nozick's conditions with regard to H (= *that I have hands*).

But now we run into another problem, because if the actual world is a non-skeptical world, then it looks like I *do* know that I satisfy all four of Nozick's conditions with regard to H, given Nozick's analysis:

I satisfy all four conditions with regard to H.

I believe that I satisfy all four conditions with regard to H.

If I didn't satisfy all four conditions with regard to H, I wouldn't believe that I satisfy all four conditions with regard to H.

If I did satisfy all four conditions with regard to H, I would believe that I satisfy all four conditions with regard to H.

More generally, Craig seems to have slide from the issue of *whether I know H* to the issue of *whether I know that I know H*. But if the actual world is a non-skeptical world, not only does it follow from Nozick's analysis that I know H, but it also plausibly follows that I know that I know H.