

REPLY TO HETHERINGTON*

RÉPLICA A HETHERINGTON

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1. First let me note a couple of minor errors that Hetherington makes in reporting or interpreting what I say:

- (a) In note 2 Hetherington speaks of “Ginet’s discussion of sentences whose meaning ‘does not vary from one context of utterance to another’.” Actually, I discuss, and restrict my initial definition of self-evidence to, sentences whose meaning is such that *what they say* does not vary from one context to another. The excluded sentences, ones whose meaning is such that what they say *does* vary from one context to another (e.g., “I hiked four miles this morning”), would not be excluded by H’s characterization because their *meaning* does not vary, only what they say. The variation in what they say follows from their unvarying meaning: it is part of the unvarying meaning of the first person pronoun “I” that it refers to the person uttering it.
- (b) In note 5 he points out that if my definition of self-evidence had the form ‘p is self-evident iff, for any S, if S fully understands what p says, then S believes....’ *and the conditional is construed as a material conditional*, then we would have the unfortunate result that any sentence that no one understands is self-evident. But, of course, I meant the relevant conditional to be construed as an *entailment* (not a material conditional). I had thought I was making that clear by phrasing the relevant part of (D1-prelim) as follows: “if S understands what the sentence **p** says then *it follows that S* believes...”; and the relevant part of (D1) this way: “anyone who fully understands what they would say by uttering the sentence **p** *must* either...” (emphases added).

* See Stephen Hetherington, Ginet on a priori Knowledge: Skills and Grades, in: *Veritas*, 54, 2 (2010), p. 32-40.

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Now on to more substantive matters.

2. Hetherington says:

“He [Ginet] will not intend full understanding, I take it, to be either a *priori* knowledge-that (on pain of circularity in the analysis) or a *posteriori* knowledge-that (on pain of no longer analyzing a *priori* knowledge as such).”¹

Actually, I do opt for the second alternative here: I take fully understanding what a sentence says to involve a *posteriori* knowledge about that sentence (as Comesaña notes in his comments). In note 3 of my paper² I say that ‘S understands what **p** says’ entails that S knows some truth of the form ‘What **p** says is that *r*’, and the latter is clearly a contingent truth about a particular language that could be known only a *posteriori*. But I don’t think this means that I am “no longer analyzing a *priori* knowledge as such.” As I say in the paper, and again in my reply to Comesaña, for the case where fully understanding what a sentence says entails believing what it says, the way in which the full understanding of what the sentence says is involved in the subject’s having (non-inferential) justification for believing it is *not* such as to give us reason to regard that justification as other than a *priori*. If this were not so, then it would be impossible to know a *priori*, e.g., that a rhombus is a Euclidean plane figure with four equal sides. Knowing this requires understanding the proposition that a rhombus is a Euclidean plane figure with four equal sides, and no one could understand that proposition who understood no sentence **p** that expresses that proposition.

3. Hetherington suggests that what I mean by application-competence with respect to a descriptive term is a kind of knowing-how. This is obviously right: it is knowing how to apply and withhold the term correctly. And since (on my account) fully understanding what a sentence says involves having application-competence with respect to its descriptive terms, it too is, or involves, a kind of knowing-how. But, contrary to what Hetherington seems to think, this move does not avoid supposing that application competence and full understanding involve a *posteriori* knowledge. For the kind of knowing-how involved here is also a kind of knowing-that. This is quite obvious with respect to application competence for a descriptive term **d**: it is knowing which sorts of cases **d** applies to and which sorts it does not apply to (and perhaps

¹ See Stephen Hetherington, Ginet on a *priori* Knowledge: Skills and Grades, op. cit., p. 34.

² Which was not in the version of the paper presented at the Conference on the Epistemology of Keith Lehrer, PUCRS / Porto alegre (Brazil), June 27-29.

which sorts are unclear cases). And, as I've said, understanding what a sentence *p* says requires knowing some truth of the form 'What *p* says is that *r*'. (I am inclined to think that in general knowing-how reduces to knowing-that: knowing how to... is knowing to be true propositions that give a satisfactory answer to the question 'How does one...?' or 'How should/may one...?')³ In note 18 of his comments Hetherington says that elsewhere he argues that "any instance of knowledge-that is an instance of a kind of knowledge-how." For all I know, this claim may be right. If it is, and my claim that any instance of knowledge-how is an instance of knowledge-that is right, then knowledge-how and knowledge-that are necessarily co-extensive.)

4. Hetherington suggests that construing a priori knowledge as some complex knowing-how (perhaps involving various other sorts of know-how besides application-competence with respect to descriptive terms) "allows us to bypass what is usually the initial move within the metaphysics of knowledge — whereby any case of knowledge is assumed to be, for a start, a belief or something similar." He suggests this because he thinks that knowledge-how is not any sort of knowledge-that and therefore does not entail any belief-that. But if, as seems clear to me, the knowledge-how involved in a priori knowledge is in fact a sort of knowledge-that, then this way of making it out that this knowledge-how is not a species of belief-that is blocked.

5. Hetherington suggests that, if we suppose that my account of a priori knowledge (by self-evidence) is best construed as making it a kind of knowledge-how, then my account gives "some unwitting support for a conception of knowledge as able to admit of degrees or grades." The support would indeed be unwitting. In fact I don't think that anything I say in my paper commits me either to the proposition that knowledge admits of degrees or to the proposition that it doesn't. I'm quite willing to entertain the idea that it does, but of course how acceptable I would find it depends on just how it is explained.

Hetherington says that by "knowledge gradualism" he means "the thesis that a *particular p* could itself be known in various ways, ones that are more or less good, purely *qua* knowledge that *p*." There is at least one way in which I can understand this thesis and in which it strikes me as correct. One's knowledge that *p* might be more or less good according as one's justification for believing that *p* is more or less vulnerable to

³ For argument in favor of this view see Ginet 1975, pp. 6-9, and Stanley and Williamson 2001.

being wrong. For example, your knowledge that there was a bison in the backyard this morning, based on your having seen one there, is better than my knowledge of that fact based only on your telling me that you saw one there. Your justification could have been justification for a false belief as a result of your visual experience somehow misrepresenting things. My justification could have been justification for false belief as a result of your visual experience misrepresenting things, or as a result of your misspeaking when you told me what you saw, or as a result of my misunderstanding what you said. There are fewer ways things could have gone wrong in the process leading to your justified belief than they could have in the process leading to mine, for the ways things could have gone wrong in the latter case include those in the former case and a few more. This illustrates one sort of basis on which justifications might be ranked better or worse, but there are no doubt others we could think of.

6. But this does not seem to be the sort of thing Hetherington has in mind in speaking of grades of knowledge, better and worse ways of knowing that *p*. He links his understanding of this to his idea that knowledge-that is knowledge-how, that knowing that *p* is a complex of abilities relating to the proposition that *p*. He doesn't try to spell this out for the general case. But he considers the special case of a priori knowledge that *p* by its being self-evident to one that *p* and thinks that, using my account of such knowledge, we can get degrees of it from supposing that there are degrees of understanding what a sentence **p** says and that these are reflected in degrees of belief that *p*. What he says leaves me uncertain that anything helpful will emerge from this line of thought.

There can, of course, be degrees of understanding what a sentence says. If A has application-competence for the term "rhombus" but B knows only that it applies to some sort of quadrilateral figure, then A understands better what is said by "Every rhombus is a quadrilateral" than does B: A understands it fully but B does not. And for a sentence like that one, which will be self-evident to anyone who fully understands it, there may be something to H's remark, "I can correctly say of myself, 'I believe reasonably strongly that *p*,' while recognizing that my tentativeness reflects my understanding only reasonably well what **p** says." This disagrees with something I imply in my paper, namely, that if B said, "I believe that a rhombus is a quadrilateral" – rather than "I believe that what the sentence 'Every rhombus is a quadrilateral' says is true" – he would imply that he does fully understand that sentence. I'm still inclined to think I'm right on this, but I admit that by saying, "I believe that every rhombus is a quadrilateral", B might convey that he does not fully understand the sentence "Every rhombus is a quadrilateral"; since

to anyone who does fully understand the term “rhombus” it would be self-evident that a rhombus is a quadrilateral and he would not say merely that he *believes* that it is, which suggests a certain hesitancy about the commitment. But the implication of shaky understanding would be pragmatic, a conversational implicature, and not entailed by what the sentence “I believe that every rhombus is a quadrilateral” says.

But Hetherington appears to think that degrees of belief reflect or manifest degrees of understanding in a more general and more direct way. I infer this from the suggestions he makes about revising my definitions (D1) and (D2) and my claims (J) and (K). His revision of (D1), for instance, is this:

“It is self-evident to degree d that p if and only if anyone who understands to degree d what they would say by uttering the sentence p must either (i) believe to degree d what they would thereby say, namely that p , or (ii) believe to degree d that they have reason to believe, to at least degree d , that what they would thereby say is incoherent.”⁴

But I don’t see that degree or strength of belief (as we ordinarily understand that notion) does generally reflect degree of understanding of what is believed, or correlate with it in a way that would make sense of H’s revisions of my definitions. B may know that the term “rhombus” applies to some sort of quadrilateral but not know precisely which sort. B may therefore believe quite as strongly as A that what is said by “Every rhombus is a quadrilateral” is true, even though B does not understand what is said by that sentence as well as A does and B recognizes that he does not fully understand it. On the other hand, consider a non-self-evident sentence like “If X is a locally compact topological space which is either Hausdorff or regular, then the family of closed compact neighborhoods of each point is a base for its neighborhood system”. We can imagine a situation in which B does not understand what that sentence says but nevertheless knows and is quite confident that what it says is true, because he has seen it labeled THEOREM in a topology textbook; but A, who has studied topology enough to fully understand what that sentence says but has not yet seen it proved or been told that it is a theorem, believes at most only very weakly that what it says is a theorem. Here B is much weaker in understanding than A but a lot stronger than A in believing.

I don’t see that degree of understanding and degree of belief go together in the way that would seem to be required to make sense of H’s revisions of my definitions and claims. So I don’t know what to make of them.

⁴ Id. *ibid.*, p. 38-39.

References

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