

GINET ON A *PRIORI* KNOWLEDGE: SKILLS AND GRADES

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1. In 'Self-Evidence',¹ Carl Ginet offers us (p. 19) this putatively sufficient condition of knowing non-inferentially and *a priori* that *p* (for a restricted range of values of '*p*')²:

(K) *S* knows *a priori* that *p* if: it is true that *p*, it is self-evident to *S* that *p*,³ and there does not exist reason to believe that the proposition *p* is incoherent.⁴

I have a few programmatic suggestions for generalizing that condition, in part by explicating its underlying metaphysics. The result promises to be a more widely satisfiable conception of *a priori* knowledge.

2. Ginet envisages a person's fully understanding 'what the sentence *p* says' – which is the person's fully understanding 'what is said by one who utters *p* in normal circumstances in order to assert that *p*' (p. 3). The understanding involved is directed at meaning. It is one's 'understanding the parts and the structure of the sentence' (ibid.). In the next section, I say more about the details of such understanding. First, though, here is how it can help to constitute *p*'s being self-evident *simpliciter* (p. 13):

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¹ Above, in this volume. All of my otherwise unattributed page references are to his paper.

² For brevity, I will focus on Ginet's discussion of sentences whose meaning 'does not vary from one context of utterance to another' (p. 3). Later (p. 22), he begins to expand his account's scope, so as to encompass also sentences whose meaning 'may vary' in that respect. But that expanded application does not change his core conception of *a priori* knowledge.

³ Implicitly, this requirement of self-evidence is how Ginet makes his account one of a *a priori* knowledge that *p* which is also *non-inferential*.

⁴ By 'incoherent', Ginet means (p. 12) that 'its negation can be deduced from necessarily true premises'.

- (D1) For any declarative sentence p whose meaning is such that what the sentence p says does not vary from one context of utterance to another, it is self-evident that p if and only if: anyone who fully understands what they would say by uttering the sentence p must either (i) believe what they would thereby say, namely, that p , or (ii) think they have reason to believe that what they would thereby say is incoherent.

A proposition can then be self-evident to an epistemic agent S (*ibid.*):

- (D2) For any declarative sentence p whose meaning is such that what the sentence p says does not vary from one context of utterance to another, it is self-evident to S that p if and only if: it is self-evident that p , S believes that p , and S does not think she has reason to believe that what sentence p says is incoherent.

Thus, that- p is self-evident to S when it is self-evident *simpliciter*, it is believed by S , and S has no reason to disbelieve it on demonstrable grounds.

Next (*ibid.*), if it is self-evident to S that p , then S is justified in believing that p . Finally, as I noted from the outset, once a true belief of S 's is justified in that way (and there is no reason to regard it as demonstrably false), it is a *a priori* knowledge on S 's part (p. 19).

3. The heart of Ginet's analysis is his concept of full understanding.⁵ If we begin with that (we are told), we can end with a *a priori* knowledge. But what *do* we begin with, in having full understanding? Ginet demands that, in fully understanding a sentence, its 'descriptive (contentful) terms' are understood 'well enough', as is 'the way the sentence is put together' (p. 9).

Although that is a helpful beginning, it is only a structural, not a metaphysical, description. Room remains within which we may say more about the nature of understanding (and thereby full understanding). Epistemologists are far from agreeing yet on what understanding is; witness the differing suggestions by R. L. Franklin,⁶

⁵ One preliminary correction might be needed. (D1)'s conception of self-evidence is satisfiable even in the *absence* of full understanding, if it has this logical form (with the conditionals involved being material ones):

p is self-evident if and only if, for any S , if S fully understands X then S believes Y or thinks Z .

For then p can be self-evident if not everyone – *a fortiori*, if no one – fully understands X . In which case, (D2) allows p to be self-evident to S without S 's fully understanding what she would say via p . Yet Ginet's discussions presume that in each case there *is* full understanding. Still, he could correct this apparent oversight by replacing the occurrence of 'believes' in (D2) with 'fully understands'.

⁶ See R. L. Franklin, Knowledge, Belief and Understanding, in: *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 31 (1981), p. 193-208, at 202.

Linda Zagzebski,⁷ Jonathan Kvanvig,⁸ and Catherine Elgin.⁹ We might look to some or all of those suggestions in explicating Ginet's notion of full understanding. Nonetheless, I will not do so, because his remarks lead us in a distinct direction from those ones.

He will not intend full understanding, I take it, to be either a *a priori* knowledge-that (on pain of circularity in the analysis) or a *posteriori* knowledge-that (on pain of no longer analyzing a *a priori* knowledge as such). Is that a problem? Not necessarily, because those options are not the only possible ones. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Ginet's sense of understanding is most naturally interpreted instead as a form of knowledge-how. Here is why that is so.

In explicating full understanding, Ginet says that the epistemic agent would have '*application-competence* with respect to [a] term', being 'able to tell with respect to any candidate case, given sufficient relevant information about it, whether the concept applies in that case' (p. 9). And manifestly such application-competence is an ability, a skill. But arguably the possession of such an ability or skill is, in turn, one's having a kind of knowledge-how. I am using that term much as Gilbert Ryle did¹⁰: knowledge-how to do *A* is an ability to act intelligently in doing *A*¹¹. And talk of knowledge-how is apt here because on Ginet's criterion anyone with full understanding of a sentence has an ability or skill, when confronted by any candidate case, to register accurately whether or not a specific term applies to it. Accordingly, it seems, we should adopt an 'ability-interpretation' of Ginet's notion of full understanding: we would

⁷ See L. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 45-50; Recovering Understanding, in: M. Steup (ed.), *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 235-251.

⁸ See Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. For detailed critique, see Michael DePaul's and Stephen Grimm's Review Essay on Jonathan Kvanvig's *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 74 (2007), p. 498-514.

⁹ See Catherine Elgin, From Knowledge to Understanding, in: S. Hetherington (ed.), *Epistemology Futures*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006, p. 199-215; Understanding and the Facts, in: *Philosophical Studies*, 132 (2007), p. 33-42.

¹⁰ See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, London: Hutchinson, 1949; Knowing How and Knowing That [1946], in his *Collected Papers*, Vol. II, London: Hutchinson, 1971, p. 212-225.

¹¹ To do *A* intelligently (as Ryle intends us to understand this phenomenon) need not involve the action's being guided by the intellect. Ryle dismissed any requirement of such an intellectualism about actions. Elsewhere, I clarify and defend that Rylean dismissal: How to Know (That Knowledge-That is Knowledge-How), in: S. Hetherington (ed.), *Epistemology Futures*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006, p. 71-94.

conceive of such understanding as being an ability – and thereby as being a form of knowledge-how¹².

Notice how that ability-interpretation of full understanding (apart from being metaphysically apposite) might make such understanding more available in principle than would our interpreting full understanding as requiring a person to have available, in advance, discrete knowledge-that (incorporating perhaps a discursive description) of each possible candidate case¹³. Maybe Ginet did not have in mind an ability-interpretation of full understanding, allowing it (as I have urged) to be knowledge-how. But that interpretation is suggested by his remarks, as we have seen. Accordingly, we may take the opportunity to investigate the hypothesis that such an interpretation captures at least some of what full understanding is like.

4. That hypothesis has immediate ramifications. Insofar as (on Ginet's analysis) some instances of knowing *a priori* are constituted in part by the presence of some full understanding,¹⁴ those instances themselves may be conceived of as specific abilities. And each such ability, we saw, may in turn be understood as knowledge-how, in the Rylean sense. But this entails that those cases of *a priori* knowledge-that will, at their core, be cases of knowledge-how. To know *a priori* that *p* (by satisfying Ginet's sufficient condition for this) would, in part, be to understand fully what is meant by some *p*. And this component of knowing *a priori* that *p* would amount to having an ability to – the knowledge-how-to – apply *p*'s terms accurately.

Admittedly, a *complex* kind of knowledge-how would be involved. So far, we have acknowledged, knowing *a priori* that *p* could well include the ability highlighted by Ginet – specifically, one's knowing how to apply *p*'s constituent descriptive terms accurately, being able to do this

¹² We may continue speaking, too, of *states* of full understanding. Yet we must be conceptually careful: such a state would be just one possible *manifestation* of full understanding (that is, of the ability which is such understanding). The state of understanding would not *be* the full understanding as such. Rather, the full understanding would be the ability to manifest itself (such as by accurately applying the term in question to this, to that, not to the other).

¹³ Ginet does not tell us whether the range of candidate cases includes only actual ones. I suspect that he means also to cover various somehow-possible ones.

¹⁴ Or should we say that the full understanding is only a *precondition* – not a constituent – of the knowledge's presence, with the knowledge as such being the subsequently produced belief (present only once enough understanding is present)? Doing so would preserve the traditional identification of any case of knowledge with a suitably augmented belief (or something similar). But is that traditional identification correct? This section will doubt that it is.

in all cases that may arise. Yet that is not all there need be to having the ability in question. Even if Ginet's condition isolates whatever is *a priori* in the knowledge that *p*, there might be more in whatever is the *a priori*'s being knowledge that *p*. In addition, there could be one's having associated abilities. Here are some candidates:

- the ability to reason from *p*, to other sentences, in truth-relevant ways;
- the ability to remember that *p*;
- the ability to explain *p* to others;
- abilities both to pose and to answer questions as to how it is true that *p*;
- one's knowing how to act as if *p* is the case.

And so on. Possibly, the list can continue – rich yet unified, a panoply of *p*-related abilities. Opportunities abound for detailed delineation of further sub-abilities¹⁵.

In any event, so long as *a priori* knowledge is *some* such complex ability, this case 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.¹⁶ Even when epistemologists seem not to make that assumption, eventually they do. Notably, Keith Lehrer argued that knowledge is a particular sort of acceptance (a truth-seeking sort).¹⁷ But then he accepted that any such acceptance is a kind of belief. In this respect, he satisfied the

¹⁵ For more on this complexity, see my Knowing-That, Knowing-How, and Knowing Philosophically, in: *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 77 (2008), p. 307-24.

¹⁶ Generally, when epistemologists argue for this thesis of knowledge-as-belief, little more is called upon than a briefly described example. In interpreting those cases, seemingly the arguer relies upon such principles as these:

1 Knowledge is some 'thing within' the knower.

2 Knowledge that *p* requires some cognitive commitment to *p*, on the part of the knower.

Combine 1 with 2; and belief (it will be said) is a natural joint satisfier of 1 and 2. But 1 and 2 are not obligatory. 1 could usefully be replaced by the more general 1*:

1* Knowledge is some *aspect* of the knower; which need not be a single 'thing' within the knower. And 2 could usefully be replaced by the more general 2*:

2* Knowledge that *p* requires some cognitive engagement with *p* on the part of the knower.

Yes, 2* could be satisfied by the knower's believing that *p*; but no, it need not be. One such case (admittedly, a controversial one) where 2* would not be satisfied by belief is when the knowledge is conjectural. On this, see Alan Musgrave, *Critical Rationalism*, in his *Essays on Realism and Rationalism*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999, p. 314-350; How Popper (Might Have) Solved the Problem of Induction, in: *Philosophy*, 79 (2004), p. 19-31.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Keith Lehrer, *Theory of Knowledge*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990, p. 10-11.

epistemological norm. It is not a norm we *must* embrace, however. Elsewhere,¹⁸ I have argued against the idea of knowledge being a state at all, including a belief state.¹⁹ And Ginet's analysis, when interpreted as I am advocating, strengthens that proposal. To know *a priori* that *p* is to possess a network of suitable *p*-related skills. Believing accurately that *p* might well be among these. However, it will most likely be *just one among many* congruent skills. The confluence of these will amount to the *a priori* knowledge that *p*, and no *single* one of them – such as the believing – must be singled out as that knowledge.

5. I will highlight one implication of that proposed picture, an implication via which we may generalize Ginet's analysis in a *gradualist* way. That is, we may find in his analysis some unwitting support for a conception of knowledge as able to admit of degrees or grades.²⁰

Now, it is easy to misattribute knowledge-gradualism. For example, we might believe that it was espoused by Locke. A first glance tells us that he did; for chapter II of Book IV of his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is entitled 'Of the Degrees of Our Knowledge'. However, Locke meant only that some ways of knowing are epistemically stronger and better than others – where those disparate ways link us to correlatively *different* aspects of the world. And that structure is not what is meant by my term 'knowledge-gradualism'. Rather, consider the thesis that a *particular p* could itself be known in varying ways, ones that are more or less good, purely *qua* knowledge that *p*. That is knowledge-gradualism.

How does Ginet's analysis, as interpreted here, support that picture? Well, the fundamental nature of skills or abilities allows them to be gradational. There is no problem of conceptual principle in regarding them as non-absolute. In general, one can know more or less well how to do *A*. Moreover, this flexibility is a constitutive aspect of most instances of

¹⁸ See S. Hetherington, How to Know (That Knowledge-That is Knowledge-How) and Knowing-That, Knowing-How, and Knowing Philosophically. In those papers, I offer an ability-interpretation of *all* knowledge-that – not only of *a priori* knowledge-that. I argue that *any* instance of knowledge-that is an instance of a kind of knowledge-how.

¹⁹ Of course, if belief should be understood in sufficiently complex and dispositional terms, perhaps knowledge-that (understood as an ability) *remains* a kind of belief – a complex disposition. It would do so, though, by *being* the sort of complex ability at which I am gesturing. It would remain knowledge-how.

²⁰ Here, I will only gesture at this picture. For my fuller gradualist conceptions of knowledge, see *Good Knowledge, Bad Knowledge: On Two Dogmas of Epistemology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001; and "Knowing (How It is) That P: Degrees and Qualities of Knowledge". In: ALMEIDA, C. de (ed.), *Perspectives in Contemporary Epistemology – Veritas*, 50 (2005), p. 129-152.

knowing-how. Hence, if a *priori* knowledge that *p* is at heart a complex *p*-related skill, then in principle it admits of varying degrees or grades in the respective epistemic strengths or depths of its various instances.

Ginet would reject that gradualist implication, decidedly so. Manifestations only of *full* understanding are spoken of by his analysis. This is because (p. 17) he is

unable to see any way of specifying a kind or degree of understanding other than full understanding that would clearly be enough for believing. And I'm inclined to think that, if we lack any principled and motivated way of drawing a line somewhere *between* scant and full understanding, then it would be arbitrary to draw it anywhere short of full understanding. We should rule that a person cannot correctly say of herself 'I believe that *p*' if she does not fully understand what *p* says.

Yet it is hardly an epistemological given that believing is itself an absolute phenomenon. Even Ginet's final comment, on linguistic propriety, is inconclusive. 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.

Already, therefore, the two core components of Ginet's analysis of a *priori* knowledge – full understanding, conceived of as knowledge-how; and believing – should be allowed to be gradational. Again, this suggests that we might usefully discard knowledge-absolutism – the thesis that for no *p* can there be two instances of knowledge that *p*, one of which is better than the other purely as knowledge that *p*.²¹ Would the spirit of Ginet's approach be undermined if we were to incorporate knowledge-gradualism throughout it?

6. Surely not. Here is one way of modifying his relevant principles in a non-absolutist – a gradualist – way:

d-D1 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

²¹ It might be thought that contextualism (as notably endorsed by Stewart Cohen and Keith DeRose, for example) already abandons knowledge-absolutism. But that thought would be mistaken. Contextualism allows that knowledge that *p* may correctly be attributed to an epistemic subject *S* from within one context, while not from within a second one, even with nothing having changed about *S*. And that contextualist analysis remains absolutist, because it says that within each of those contexts knowing that *p* is deemed to require the elimination of *all* relevant or salient possibilities or alternatives. (What differs between the two contexts are just the respective sets of such possibilities or alternatives.) So, contextualism is absolutist in its analysis of the correctness of knowledge-attributions made *within* any particular context. In contrast, knowledge-gradualism allows that, *even* within each context, there are different possible standards for knowing that *p* — some better, others worse.

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.

- d -D2 It is self-evident to S to degree d that p if and only if (i) it is self-evident to degree d that p , (ii) S believes to degree d that p , and (iii) S does not believe to at least degree d that what sentence p says is incoherent.
- d -J If it is self-evident to S to degree d that p , then S is justified to degree d in believing that p .
- d -K S knows *a priori*, to degree d , that p if: it is true that p , it is self-evident to S to degree d that p , and there does not exist reason to believe to at least degree d that the proposition that p is incoherent.

These amended theses, if at least coherent,²² conspire to open up the possibility of our adopting a gradational concept of a *priori* knowledge.

This is so, even though Ginet's *analysandum* is a *non-inferential* kind of a *priori* knowledge. After all, any knowledge's being *non-inferential* is simply its not depending upon some inference for its status as epistemically justified. And the suggested Ginet-Rylean analysis of a *priori non-inferential* knowledge as being a complex ability, a complex kind of knowledge-how, need not mention any more specific ability to justify inferentially the belief that p . Even relevant abilities to use the belief inferentially (mentioned in §4 above) need not include justifying it as a *conclusion* of actual or possible inferences.

7. We might continue to wonder, nevertheless, whether the gradualist move of admitting less-than-full understanding into our *analysans* is worryingly arbitrary. I have rendered Ginet's associated concepts – of belief, of justification, and of a *priori* knowledge – as gradational; then I have permitted a larger range of their possible grades and degrees to play an analytical role here. Yet does this proposal merely *spread* the conceptual danger, tainting all concepts it touches? Will it divest these concepts of their proper discriminatory capacities?

8. To those questions, I would like to reply, confidently, 'No, not at all.' More cautiously, what I *will* say confidently is that we are not well placed to know for sure that gradualism is *not* what we should accept in analyzing such phenomena. As we noticed earlier, Ginet labels as

²² I doubt that they are accurate in all details. Still, are they of a form that *could* be correct? That would suffice for my purposes (as, naturally, would other possible gradualist adaptations of Ginet's theses).

'arbitrary' any condition aiming to describe a *priori* knowledge as grounded in less-than-full understanding; and he buttresses his case by providing supposed examples of sentences that are self-evident and thereby fully understood (p. 7). But can he know for sure that these are instances of full understanding, rather than merely very good understanding? I doubt it.

Conceptual caution therefore enjoins us to ask (with some lesser, correlative, degree of confidence) only for whatever degree or grade of understanding *befits* the associated skills. Manifestly, there are cases about which we would remain unsure. This need not perturb us, though. Right now, my main conceptual point of principle is that if a *priori* knowing is a skill, there *will* most likely be intermediate cases. At worst, we will not know fully how to react to these – whether, or not, to classify them as a *priori* knowledge based on a correlative degree of understanding. Also at worst (as I have argued elsewhere),²³ this lack of perfect meta-knowledge may *lessen the quality* of our associated knowledge. It may lessen the quality even of our knowledge that in Ginet's cases a *priori* knowledge is present. It will especially lessen the quality of our knowledge that in those or other cases some *particular* specified quality or degree of a *priori* knowledge is present.

Still, the good news is that this does not entail that in no such cases could we know at least *reasonably* well that *reasonably* good a *priori* knowledge is present. And there should be fallibilist cheer in this possibility's remaining epistemically available to us. As a gradualist fallibilist who endorses an ability analysis of knowing in general, I suspect that it is also the most for which we should hope in this specific case.

²³ See S. Hetherington, *Good Knowledge, Bad Knowledge*, p. 60-62; "Knowledge's Boundary Problem", in: *Synthese*, 150 (2006), p. 41-56.