

Austin on Knowledge

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Other Minds

- There is a philosophical issue concerning whether it is possible for someone to know whether minds other than his own exist, or what their states are.
- This has come to be known as “the problem of other minds.”
- In *The Concept of Mind* (1949), Ryle claimed that there is no problem, because the concept of mind inherited from Descartes is based on a misuse of language.
- The categories “thing,” “causal agent,” etc. that apply to the physical world are used to create a new kind of “thing,” a “ghost” in the machine that is the body.
- If mind is not taken to be a substantive thing, we can know that other minds exist and what their states are simply through the observation of others’ behavior.

Austin’s Approach to Knowledge of Other Minds

- Austin focused on a specific question raised by John Wisdom.
 - “How do we know that another man is angry?”
 - Do we know in the same way in which we know things about physical objects?
- The key to answering the question is not sought in a Rylean reduction of anger to a form of physical behavior.
- Rather, the key is to get clear about the linguistic practices involved in making claims to knowledge.
- Pursuing this issue leads to some surprising consequences about how knowledge should be conceived.

Knowing and Believing

- Although we often ask “How do you know?” or “Why do you believe” (or “Why are you sure”) from curiosity, we often do so as a challenge.
- If the person does not give an adequate answer to “How do you know,” then we tend to respond that he *does not* know.
- If the person does not give an adequate answer to “Why do you believe,” then we tend to respond that he *ought not* to believe, but not that he does not believe.
- If “I believe” is a description of a mental state, etc., then “I know” “functions differently in talking.”
- The *apparent* difference is that “I know” describes more: that I cannot be wrong in what I know.
- According to this view, “You can always show I don’t know by showing I am wrong, or may be wrong, or that I didn’t know by showing that I might have been wrong.”

How Do You Know?

- There are two basic types of answers to a “How do you know?” question, each of which can be general or specific to the present case.
 - How you are in a position to know about:
 - * The kind of thing in question.
 - * The specific thing in question.
 - How you are able to tell:
 - * That anything is of the kind of thing in question.
 - * That the specific thing in question is of this kind.

The Bittern Example

- Suppose I say, “There’s a bittern at the bottom of the garden,”
- And you ask, “How do you know?”
- The English bittern is tough to detect by direct visual sighting, and in the present case, if it is known that a bittern is there, it is by its sound.



How Do You Know There is a Bittern There?

- Four things are required in order to know that there is a bittern at the bottom of the garden.
 - Training in an environment in which one could become familiar with them.
 - Having an opportunity to recognize a bittern now.
 - Having learned to recognize bitterns.
 - Having succeeded in recognizing that there is a bittern now.
- Austin may have chosen the bittern example because it is closer to the anger case than is an example with direct sighting, as in the goldfinch case to follow.

The Goldfinch Example

- It can be asked how you know there is a goldfinch.



- You must have have been trained in an environment where you could become familiar with one and learned how to recognize one.
- And you must have an opportunity to recognize a goldfinch now and have succeeded in so doing.
- Either point may be challenged, and the challenge is answered in ordinary ways.

Extraordinary Challenges

- The claim to know that it is a goldfinch may be challenged in three special ways which are not ordinarily invoked.
 - Is it a *real* goldfinch, as opposed to a stuffed goldfinch, etc.?
 - Are you *sure* it is a goldfinch?
 - *Might you be mistaken* in claiming that it is a goldfinch?
- In asking these questions, one is querying the credentials of the person claiming knowledge or disputing the facts on which the proof that it is depends.

Is it Real?

- For the question “But is it real?” to arise, there must be something out of the ordinary to prompt it.
- There may be some reason to think that the goldfinch is stuffed (though not this reason probably would not raise suspicions that it is a mirage).
- When it arises, the question is answered using essentially the same devices on which the original knowledge claim was based.
- We should only expect reasonable precautions to avoid error, “relative to current intents and purposes” (88).
- But the wile of the metaphysician is to ask “Is it real?” without specifying what may be wrong with our claim, which puts us at a loss for words.

Are You Sure?

- While we may challenge a knowledge claim by asking, “But are you sure,” there is some question about what we can be sure about.
- Philosophers have claimed that we can only be sure about special objects, “*sensa*,” or “sense data,” which are subjective in character.
- But we are in general no more sure about the “special objects” than we are about ordinary objects.
 - We hesitate in describing the exact shade of a color, for example.
- If we were really to be sure about “*sensa*,” they would have to “announce” what they are.
- If they do announce themselves, they do so unclearly as does anything else that “announces itself.”
- So we should not seek certainty in knowledge beyond that which is required in ordinary cases, such as in identifying a goldfinch.

Fallibilism

- A potential challenge to knowledge-claims is that the claimant might be wrong, given that it is a necessary condition of knowing that if you know, you cannot be wrong (infallibilism).
- The account of knowledge given by Austin allows that correct knowledge claims not only could be wrong, but sometimes *are* wrong.
 - “We are often right to say we *know* even in cases where we turn out subsequently to be mistaken—and indeed we seem always, or practically always, liable to be mistaken” (98).
- The basis of this claim lies in an account of what it is to be “right to say” that we know.
- This, in turn, requires an account of the nature of claims to know.

Knowing and Promising

- There is a perfectly good sense to the requirement that “When you know, you can’t be wrong.”
- It is a prohibition against saying, “I know it is so, but I may be wrong.”
- One is similarly prohibited from saying, “I promise I will, but I may fail.”
- “If you are aware that you may be mistaken, you ought not to say you know, just as, if you are aware you may break your word, you have no business to promise” (98).
- The prohibition is against making knowledge claims when aware of a *specific reason* that you may be mistaken, and not when aware merely of general human fallibility.

Knowledge Claims as Performatives

- To make a knowledge claim is to “take a new plunge” beyond stating that you believe or even that you are sure.
- It is to engage in a ritual which changes your relation to the hearers (a performative utterance).
- It is to *give your word* that what you say is true.
- If what you have claimed to know turns out to be false, then you may be held accountable, just as when you make a promise that you do not carry out.
- It is a fallacy (“the descriptive fallacy”) to suppose that in claiming to know you are merely describing your current state (as with belief) and not changing it.

Knowing that You are Angry

- In general, one's knowledge-claims about the emotional states of other people are generated in the same way as claims about there being a goldfinch.
- They generally can be challenged in the same ways, and the challenges are met in the same ways.
- There are three special problems with knowledge of others' emotions:
 - They may be deceiving us,
 - We may be misunderstanding which emotion they have,
 - There may be an absence of emotion.
- Each of these is dealt with in the usual way.
- We take people at their word when they say they are angry, etc. as this is an essential part of the act of communicating.