Are all Knowable Truths Knowable from Core Evidence?

David Chalmers

Plan

*1. Foundationalism and Core Evidence

2. Scrutability and Knowability

3. Core Knowability and High-Level Perception

Foundationalism

- A traditional foundationalist thesis:

  - All empirical knowledge is grounded in inference from foundational beliefs

  - Foundational beliefs are limited to introspective and perhaps perceptual beliefs

Core Evidence

- *Core evidence =*
  - introspective evidence about phenomenal qualities
  - perceptual evidence about primary and secondary qualities

Knowledge from Core Evidence

- Core evidence thesis: All knowledge is grounded in reasoning from core evidence (RCE).

    - (i) reasoning alone (a priori knowledge)

    - (ii) evidence alone (foundational beliefs)

    - (iii) a combination (a priori reasoning from foundational beliefs).

Objections to the Thesis

- There can be knowledge via alternative routes

  - Testimony, memory

  - Unconscious perception (e.g. blindsight)

  - Recognition (e.g. chicken-sexing)

  - High-level perception (e.g. pine trees)

Core Knowability Thesis

- Core knowability thesis: All knowable truths are knowable through reasoning from core evidence

  - Knowledge through alternative routes may be possible, but what is known could be known through RCE.

Alternative Routes

- If p is known through testimony, p can be known non-testimonially

- If p is known through memory, p can be known non-memorially

- If p is known through unconscious perception, p can be known through conscious perception.

Alternative Routes II

- If p can be known through high-level perception, p can be known without using high-level perception.

- [I'll focus on this claim.]

Plan

1. Foundationalism and Core Evidence

*2. Scrutability and Knowability

3. Core Knowability and High-Level Perception

Scrutability Thesis

- S is a priori scrutable from C when 'If C then S' is knowable a priori.

- Scrutability Thesis: There is a compact class of truths such that all truths are a priori scrutable from C.

  - Compact = small, no trivializing mechanisms.

PQTI

- PQTI Scrutability: All truths are a priori scrutable from PQTI.

- PQTI = A conjunction of

  - Microphysical and macrophysical truths in physical vocabulary

  - Phenomenal, mental, secondary-quality truths

  - That's-all statement

  - Indexical truths

Argument from Knowability

1. All knowable truths are scrutable from PQTI.

2. If all knowable truths are scrutable from PQTI, then all unknowable truths are scrutable from PQTI.

_____

3. All truths are scrutable from PQTI.

Case for Premise 2

- The sources of unknowability are X, Y, Z:

    - E.g. Fitchian truths, physically inaccessible truths

- X, Y, Z are not sources of inscrutability

    - Fitchiness, physically inaccessibility, etc, pose no obstacle to scrutability from PQTI.

- If so, then if all knowable truths are scrutable, all unknowable truths are scrutable.

Case for Premise 1

1. All knowable truths are knowable via reasoning from core evidence.

2. If p is knowable via reasoning from core evidence, p is scrutable from PQTI. [because PQTI includes all the core evidence]

_____

3. All knowable truths are scrutable from PQTI.

Fitchian Objection

- Let q be a truth that is known but not known via RCE.

- Let p be: q and q is not known via RCE.

- Then p is plausibly knowable, but is not knowable via RCE.

Fitchian Response

- p is a Fitchian truth: One such that if p were investigated [via RCE] p would be false.

    - One can still know whether p

- We can amend the thesis to: All knowable non-Fitchian truths are knowable via RCE.

- Justification: Fitchiness is no obstacle to scrutability.

- I'll presume the amendment in what follows.

Plan

1. Foundationalism and Core Evidence

2. Scrutability and Knowability

*3. Core Knowability and High-Level Perception

Objection from High-Level Perception

- Perception (arguably) doesn't just represent core properties: primary and secondary qualities

- It also represents noncore properties: being a peach, being Obama, being alive.

- Perceptual beliefs about these properties isn't grounded in reasoning from core evidence.

Objection from Recognition

- We have the capacity to directly recognize noncore properties on the basis of perception, whether or not perception represents those properties:

    - e.g. recognizing Obama or a peach

- Recognitional knowledge of these properties isn't grounded in reasoning from core evidence.

    (For convenience I'll class this as high-level perception and as a perceptual capacity.)

Initial Response

- Key Thesis: Everything knowable using high-level perception is also knowable without using high-level perception.

What We Need to Show

- Say someone has the capacity to perceive a noncore property Φ, resulting in perceptual knowledge of p (concerning the instantiation of Φ).

- We need to argue that even without this Φ-capacity (and with no new capacities), someone could know p.

Basic Idea

- One's perceptual system always detects noncore properties Φ by first detecting non-Φ properties (e.g. system detects a peach by detecting color, shape, etc).

  - Synchronically: Via transitions from low-level mechanisms.

  - Diachronically: Via exposure to relations between Φ and non-Φ properties.

- These routes can be exploited to yield knowledge of p without the Φ-capacity.

The Causal Argument

1. For all noncore p, all perceptual experience and perceptual knowledge of p is produced by transitions from core representations.

2. For all noncore p, if perceptual knowledge of p is produced by transitions from core representations, knowledge of p can also be produced by inference from core (perceptual) beliefs.

_____

3. For all noncore p, if perceptual knowledge of p is possible, knowledge of p can be produced by inference from core perceptual beliefs.

Case for Premise 1

- Empirical: All perception works through transitions from low-level representations.

- Objection 1: Nonrepresentational views.

- Response: Working through sensitivity to core qualities is enough.

- Objection 2: The low-level properties needn't be primary/secondary qualities (e.g. frequencies).

- Response: They'll at least strongly correlate with these.

Case for Premise 2

- If transition from representation of C to Φ yields knowledge, so can transition from knowledge of C

    - I.e. knowledge is no worse than other forms of representation in yielding knowledge.

- Objection: Belief is held to a higher standard than experience in justifying belief.

- Reply: Unobvious, and we can appeal to strong (high-standard) knowledge.

Conclusion

- Knowledge of p can be produced by inference from core perceptual beliefs.

- Is this good enough?

  - Wholly/partly produced, empirical/priori inference; doesn't matter (no Φ-capacity used!)

  - Associative or deductive inference?

    - Associative inference raises similar issues. But: evidence for association can yield deductive inference (next).

The Argument from Acquisition

- Assume the concept of Φ is acquired

- Then the concept is either a

  - recognitional concept: acquired as a result of the Φ-capacity

  - nonrecognitional concept: acquired independently of the Φ-capacity

Nonrecognitional Concepts

- Start: A nonrecognitional concept of Φ.

  - E.g. gay, computer, astronaut, Obama

- Finish: A capacity for recognizing instances of Φ.

  - E.g. gaydar, computer recognition, ...

- The capacity involves recognizing Φ via detection of non-Φ properties C.

Capacities and Evidence

- Thought: Acquisition of the Φ-capacity turns on apparent evidence for a relation between C and Φ: e.g. things with C are always or usually Φ.

- For the capacity to yield knowledge of p, the evidence must be good evidence, the sort that could yield knowledge of

  - (i) the C-Φ relation

  - (ii) p, via C and the C-Φ relation

Argument

1. Knowledge of p via a Φ-capacity requires evidence for C and a C-Φ relation.

2. This evidence could ground knowledge of C and the C-Φ relation and so knowledge of p.

_____

3. If one knows p via a Φ-capacity, one could know p without using the Φ-capacity.

Objections

- Objection: One could acquire a reliable C-Φ capacity without good evidence of a C-Φ relation, e.g. by lucky beliefs or by being zapped.

- Response: This doesn't obviously yield knowledge, and doesn't yield strong knowledge. Formulate argument in terms of strong knowledge.

- Objection: There's not much strong knowledge

- Reply: Yes there is. And even where not, there's strong knowability.

Recognitional Concept

- Suppose the concept of Φ is acquired along with (or as a result of) the capacity to perceive/recognize Φ. This will be a recognitional concept, of *that* sort of thing.

    - E.g. phoneme concept, some kind concepts.

Recognitional Concepts

- Claim: Recognitional concepts are either

    - response-dependent concepts (what causes this sort of response)

        - then Φ-truths knowable via knowledge of what causes the relevant responses.

    - qualitative concepts (what has such-and-such lower-level qualities)

        - then Φ-truths are knowable via knowledge of qualities

Objection: Proves Too Much

- If argument shows high-level recognitional capacities involving recognitional concepts are dispensable, the same goes (implausibly) for basic sensory capacities.

- Reply: one needs these (but not high-level capacities) for knowledge of responses/qualities

- Couldn't there be a high-level capacity with its own corresponding quality (cf. color)?

- Reply: Seems not, if there were it would count as a secondary quality.

Innate Concepts

- If the concept of Φ is unacquired: it will still have been acquired at some point in evolution, either as a result of the Φ-capacity or not. Then the argument from acquisition applies.

Residual Issue: Other Routes

- I've argued that Φ-capacities are dispensable, individually and jointly (?), in producing knowledge.

- To ground the core knowability thesis, I also need to exclude other routes.

  - Memory, testimony, unconscious perception: discussed.

  - Associative inference: treat the same way.

  - Other routes?

Conclusion

- There's a prima facie (if tentative!) case for the core knowability thesis: all knowable truths are knowable on the basis of reasoning from core evidence.