Knowing Less by Knowing More

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I

It is a well known property of non-deductive inference that you can weaken such an inference by adding to its premises. For example, the conclusion

(1) Hobart defeated Cornell in their basketball game yesterday,

is supported much more strongly by the premise

(2) The announcer on the eleven o'clock newscast last night said, "Hobart nipped Cornell 79 to 78 this evening,"

than it is by that premise conjoined with

(3) The announcer on the eight o'clock newscast this morning said, "Last night Cornell squeaked by Hobart 79 to 78."

This property of non-deductive inference appears to lead to a somewhat surprising conclusion about knowledge. Because of it, it seems, one can pass from knowing a certain fact to not knowing it merely by acquiring more information relevant to whether or not that fact obtains. Suppose that (1) is true. And suppose that, listening to the eleven o'clock newscast last night, I came to know that (2) is true. It certainly seems right to say that upon coming to know that (2) is true I came to know that (1) is true — provided, of course, that I believed that (1) is true on the basis of my knowledge of (2) and of the general background that makes (2) good evidence for (1) and I knew of no evidence against (1). One of the common ways in which we come to know the outcomes of sporting events is by hearing them reported on the radio. But suppose further that I listened to the eight o'clock newscast this morning and came to know that (3) is true. And suppose that at that point and for some time thereafter I knew nothing other than (2) and (3) that was specifically relevant to whether or not (1) is true. Then, certainly, during that
period I did not know that (1) is true. The same general background that makes (2) by itself strong evidence for (1) makes (3) by itself strong evidence against (1) and so makes the conjunctive of (2) and (3), by itself, of no evidentiary value either way with respect to (1). During that period I had no justification at all for believing (1) to be true and therefore certainly did not know it to be true. So: like many others who learned it from last night's newscast, I knew that Hobart defeated Cornell; but, unlike those fortunate ones who missed this morning's newscast, I ceased to know this; and this loss of knowledge was brought about simply by my gaining the knowledge that this morning's newscast said otherwise.

This seems to me, at any rate, the right way to describe such a case. But some may balk at this description. While not wishing to deny that one can cease to know what one once knew, they may resist the idea that one can do this simply by learning more. Knowledge, they may be inclined to say, ought to be more secure than that: though not proof against forgetting, it ought to be proof against further knowledge. Philosophers so inclined may even seek ways to show that it is impossible to know less by knowing more.

One way this might be argued would be by denying that knowledge — the genuine article — can be obtained by non-deductive inference. Just because justification of belief by such inference is vulnerable to defeat by new information (or new justified beliefs), it might be said, such inference cannot provide the sort of justification required for knowledge. Unfortunately, this line requires one to deny that a great deal of what passes for knowledge really is so. It requires one to suppose that knowledge is very much harder to come by, and very much more rarely attained, than we ordinarily think it is. Thus it trades a minor touch of insecurity in knowledge for a major loss of means to its attainment. This does not look like a sensible bargain.

II

Those who are disinclined to admit the possibility of knowing less by knowing more may, therefore, be inclined (at least at first) to welcome an intriguing argument stated in the literature a few years ago by Gilbert Harman. This argument does not tamper with the ordinary initial conditions for knowledge. It leaves them as our everyday intuitions would have them. Instead it attempts to provide any one who can once correctly claim to know a thing with a justification for continuing to claim to know it no matter what new information she may acquire.

Harman states the argument in the following way (I have inserted letters to label the various propositions in the argument):

If (a) I know that b is true, (b) I know that evidence against b is evidence against something that is true; so (c) I know that such evidence is misleading. But (d) I should disregard evidence that is misleading. So, once (a) I know that b is true, (e) I am in a position to disregard any future evidence that seems to tell against b.

This statement of the argument has a minor defect that, for my purposes, it is safe and convenient to ignore. Strictly speaking, the first premise is not necessarily true: (b) does not follow from (a). If I know that b is true, then I know that evidence against b is evidence against a truth, provided also that my knowledge of b leads me, through my knowledge of the obvious logical connection, to believe confidently that any evidence against b is evidence against a truth. (It is obvious that b entails that evidence against b is evidence against a truth.)

There are, however, some flaws in Harman's formulation that I think we should remedy before going on to evaluate the argument.

First, the subordinate inference from (b) to (c) looks unnecessary. To say that evidence against a truth is misleading is just to say that it is evidence against a truth.

Second, it is not as clear as it should be what is meant by the last clause of the conclusion, namely, (e) I am in a position to disregard any future evidence that seems to tell against b. This must, I think, be taken to mean that any fact I might in the future come to know will then be entitled to treat as no evidence for me against b, as not weakening the case I have for believing confidently that b is true (however much it might seem that I should treat the new information as weakening my case for b).

Third, what premise (d) tells us looks unnecessarily paradoxical. The point is not that I should take what I recognize to be evidence against b and, because it is misleading, treat it as no evidence against b. Rather, the point is that if I know that my counting some fact as evidence against b — as weakening my case for b — would be to count it as evidence against a truth, then I am entitled not to count it as evidence against b. By the same token, the formulation of clause (b) is needlessly paradoxical: it is not that I know that what I take to be evidence against b is evidence against a truth but that I know that if I were to count something as evidence against b I would be counting it as evidence against a truth.

Fourth, the argument must assume that I do not in the future forget my knowledge of the truth of b. For this possibility provides an obvious way in which the conclusion of the argument could be false that has not been explicitly ruled out in the premises.

These observations so far suggest the following reformulation of the argument:

For any propositions b and f: if (a) I know that b is true, then (b) I know that, if in the future I come to know that f is true and to count f as evidence against b, I will be counting f as evidence against a truth. But (d) if I know that f is true and that if I count f as evidence against b I will be counting f as evidence against a truth, then I am entitled not to count f as evidence against b; so, if (a) I know that b is true, and I do not forget this knowledge, then (e) if in the future I come to know that f is true then at that time I am entitled not to count f as evidence against b.

This revision of the argument reveals a significant gap in it. The argument, in effect, affirms that (e) follows from (a) by means of (b) and the conditional (d).
But note that (b) is not the same proposition as the antecedent of (d). (b) says: I know that if I come to know that \( f \) is true, then, if I then count \( f \) as evidence against \( b \), I will be counting \( f \) as evidence against a truth. The antecedent of (d) says: I know that \( f \) is true and that if I count \( f \) as evidence against \( b \), then I count \( f \) as evidence against a truth. If (e) is really to follow, these two propositions must be linked by the further assumption that if I know what (b) says I know (and I do not in the future forget this knowledge), then if in the future I came to know that \( f \) is true then at that time I know what the antecedent of (d) says I know.

If we add this assumption as a premise, we obtain the following valid formulation of the argument:

For any propositions \( b \) and \( f \):

(4) if (a) I know that \( b \) is true, then (b) I know that, if in the future I come to know \( f \) to be true, my then counting \( f \) as evidence against \( b \) would be to count \( f \) as evidence against a truth;

(5) if (b) I know that if in the future I come to know \( f \) to be true then my counting \( f \) as evidence against \( b \) would be to count \( f \) as evidence against a truth, and I do not forget this knowledge, then if in the future I come to know that \( f \) is true then at that time I know that my counting \( f \) as evidence against \( b \) would be to count \( f \) as evidence against a truth;

(6) if (d) I know that \( f \) is true and that my counting \( f \) as evidence against \( b \) would be to count \( f \) as evidence against a truth, then I am entitled not to count \( f \) as evidence against \( b \);

(7) therefore, if (a) I know that \( b \) is true, and I do not forget this knowledge, then (e) if in the future I come to know that \( f \) is true, then at that time I am entitled not to count \( f \) as evidence against \( b \).

If this argument is sound, then what we said about the case of my hearing on the radio conflicting reports of the outcome of a basketball game is wrong. If (1) is substituted for \( b \) and (3) for \( f \), the argument tells us that, once I knew that (1) is true (by inference from (2)), then, assuming that I did not forget this knowledge, when I came to know (3) I was entitled to regard the fact that (3) as no evidence at all against the truth of (1). This is enough to convince me that the argument cannot be sound, but, of course, it would not be enough for anyone who dislikes the idea that one can lose knowledge by gaining it and who dislikes it enough to doubt the correctness of what we said about the case of the conflicting newscasts.

There is, however, a stronger reason for suspecting that something must be wrong with the argument. The argument does not depend on anything peculiar to the meaning of ‘know’. It works just as well if ‘know’ is replaced throughout with ‘justifiably believe’. This means that if the argument were sound it would demonstrate that either non-deductive inference does not possess the well-known property mentioned at the beginning of this paper (namely, that adding information to the premises can weaken the argument, i.e., weaken the justification that justified belief in the premises provides for belief in the conclusion) or else non-deductive inference is incapable of justifying even belief (much less a claim to know). Thus the argument proves more than even those who like the conclusion might wish to accept.

I think it likely that most philosophers will, upon reflection, agree that the argument must go wrong somewhere. Where? It is valid, in our latest formulation. Which, then, of the three premises is (are) false?

Harman offers a brief diagnosis of the problem:

The argument . . . overlooks the way actually having evidence can make a difference. Since I now know that \( b \) is true, I now know that any evidence that appears to indicate something else is misleading. That does not warrant me in simply disregarding any further evidence, since getting that further evidence can change what I know. In particular, after I get such further evidence I may no longer know that it is misleading. For having the new evidence can make it true that I no longer know that \( b \) is true; if I no longer know that, I no longer know that the new evidence is misleading. The second sentence here is not entirely unambiguous. The clause ‘I now know that any evidence that appears to indicate something else is misleading’ could be taken to refer to evidence that I know already possess. But I think that Harman means that, since I now know that \( b \) is true, I now know that if I were in the future to take some newly learned fact to be evidence against \( b \) I would in so doing be misled. Thus I think he means to accept the first premise of the argument as I have reformulated it, i.e., (4). And I think that this premise should be accepted. When, after hearing the late evening news, I knew that Hobart had defeated Cornell, I also knew that if in the future I were to take some newly learned fact to be evidence against this proposition, I would be taking it to be evidence against a truth. Right after the eleven o’clock newscast I could have said that I know that Hobart defeated Cornell and, therefore, I know — what I see to be an obvious logical consequence — that if tomorrow I hear some newscaster say something to the contrary and take that to be evidence to the contrary, then I will be counting that as evidence against what is in fact a truth.

What Harman goes on to say, after the second sentence of the passage quoted above, does not seem to quarrel with the third premise of the argument as I have reformulated it, i.e., (6). I think that this too is as it should be, provided we understand “count \( f \) as evidence against \( b \)” in the right way. In the context of this argument this phrase should be taken to mean “count \( f \) as weakening the overall case I have for believing \( b \) to the extent required for knowing \( b \)” (if this latter phrase is substituted for the former throughout the argument, my claim a few paragraphs back that the argument works just as well if ‘know’ is replaced throughout with ‘justifiably believe’ still holds). On this reading of this key phrase the truth of (6) is plain. I cannot, at the same time, both know that \( b \) is true and be required to count my knowledge of \( f \) as making my overall case for believing \( b \) weaker than what is required for knowing \( b \).

What Harman does question in the passage quoted above, if I understand
him right, is the second premise of my reformulation, i.e., (5). (This is the premise that was not explicit in Harman’s formulation of the argument quoted earlier.) Here again, I think he is right. This is where the argument leaves the track. What Harman says amounts to this: the basis on which I now know \( b \) and the proposition \( f \) may be such that my coming to know \( f \) would make me cease to know \( b \). This is true and important, but I think it needs spelling out how, in light of this, (5) is false and, perhaps more important, how (5), though false, can seem true.

(5) says that if first I know a certain conditional proposition and, not forgetting this knowledge, I later come to know its antecedent (assuming that when I come to know \( f \) I will know that I know it), then I will (if I have my logical wits about me) thereby come to know its consequent. Stated thus abstractly, this looks very plausible. We are taken in because we find such a progression through *modus ponens* quite natural and familiar: it is a common pattern for the acquisition of knowledge. What we overlook is that this progression need not always be possible. There can be conditional propositions whose content is such that, although one may know (justifiedly believe) the conditional in a situation where its antecedent is true, the way in which one knows this (one’s justification for believing this) may depend on one’s *not* knowing (believing) that the antecedent is true.

Consider, for example, these conditionals:

(8) If he has spoken falsely, I will always be deceived. (For I can never doubt him.)

(9) If there was such a meeting, then I’ll be forever innocent of the fact.

It is transparent that I could not know (justifiedly believe) either of these conditionals (in any way at all) except by failing to know (believe) its antecedent. For the content of antecedent and consequent are so related that my knowing (believing) the antecedent means that I do not know (justifiedly believe) the consequent. (Indeed, in these cases, my knowing the antecedent is incompatible with the truth of the consequent.)

Now take (5), substitute (1) for \( b \) and (3) for \( f \), suppose the result to be asserted shortly after I have come to know (1) on the basis of (2), and consider the conditional that the antecedent of (5) then says, namely:

(10) If I come to know that the announcer on the eight o’clock newscast tomorrow morning says that Cornell squeaked by Hobart 79 to 78, then my counting that announcement as evidence that Hobart did not defeat Cornell will be to count it as evidence against a truth.

(10) is much like (8) and (9). The contents of the antecedent and consequent of (10) are related to each other, and to the basis on which I know (10) in the example, in such a way that I could not know (10) on that basis except by failing to know its antecedent. Had I not come to know (2) until I had already come to know (3) and therewith (knowing that I know it) the antecedent of (10), I could not have known (1) or its logical consequence (10) merely on the basis of knowing (2). Thus the content of (10) and the way in which it is known in this situation

are such that I cannot go on to add to the situation knowledge of the antecedent of (10) without thereby losing knowledge of (10). Thus (10) is here incapacitated for use in the familiar progression through *modus ponens*. As with (8) and (9), knowledge of the conditional cannot consort with knowledge of its antecedent. Therefore, contrary to what we assume when we find (5) plausible, one cannot simply add knowledge of the antecedent to one’s already acquired knowledge of the conditional to yield knowledge of the consequent. Premise (5) is involved in somewhat the same absurdity as (A) is in the following dialogue: A: “If he spoke falsely, I will always be deceived.” B: “He did speak falsely.” A: “Then I will always be deceived.” (The absurdity is not exactly the same. The reason my knowing the conditional depends on my not knowing the antecedent in the case of (8), though not in the case of (10), is that the *truth* of the conditional is incompatible with my knowing the antecedent.)

Conditionals the knowledge of which depends on failure to know their antecedents are sufficiently uncommon that one is not likely to have become familiar with the fact that a conditional can have this property that thwarts progression through *modus ponens*. That may be why one may find (5) and this whole argument tempting, or at least find oneself at a loss to identify the snag in it. But once identified, the snag is indisputable and does ruin the argument. It is safe to conclude that in this argument there is no sound basis at all for doubting the possibility of decreasing one’s knowledge by means of increasing it.

If I can lose a piece of knowledge just by gaining another, then it follows, of course, that when I have the knowledge I can fail to know that I will not in the future thus lose it. More than this, I can fail to have justification for claiming to know that I will not thus lose it. Consider our example. At the time when I know (1) on the basis of (2) and know (by a simple deduction from (1)) that if I come to know (3) and count it as evidence against (1) I will be counting it as evidence against a truth, I need not be in a position to be sure that I will not in the future come to know (3) — even if I know that if I do come to know (3) then I will no longer know (1). Indeed, in the ordinary sort of case, it would seem to be going far too far for me to claim to know that tomorrow morning’s newscast will not contradict what I have just learned from tonight’s newscast. From the three premises,

(i) I know (1) on the basis of (2),

(ii) if in the future I come to know (3) and count it as evidence against (1) then I will be counting it as evidence against a truth,

(iii) if in the future I come to know (3), then I will no longer know (1),

all of which we may suppose I now know, there is no legitimate inference to the conclusion that I will not in the future come to know (3). It does not follow deductively and it is hard to see any acceptable inferential principles that would sanction it as a non-deductive inference in every world in which knowing less by knowing more is possible. So we have another mildly surprising result: I can know something in such a way that at the same time I must admit that I do not know that I will not later be forced by a certain specific development to give up my claim to know it.
III

The possibility of knowing less by knowing more could also be described as the possibility of knowledge that depends on ignorance of conflicting evidence. In defending the possibility of such knowledge I do not wish to be misunderstood as defending a different and stronger claim that might be confused with it, namely the claim that whenever a person’s ignorance of conflicting evidence protects her justification for claiming to know a fact—that is, the person is entitled to claim to know it, but only because she is ignorant of the conflicting evidence—then that person does know that fact, no matter what the nature of the conflicting evidence. This claim is now widely recognized to be false.

Its falsity can be seen by making some alterations on the example we have been using. Suppose that (1) is true and that, having heard the eleven-o’clock news, I came to know (2) and, on that basis, justifiably assumed that I knew (1). But suppose that the announcer on the eleven o’clock news slipped up in reading the sheet before her, inadvertently reversing the names ‘Cornell’ and ‘Hobart’. Suppose further that this sheet was typed by a cohort taking a telephoned report and that this cohort slipped up in typing the accurate report he heard, inadvertently reversing the names of the two schools. The announcer announces the truth, but only quite fortuitously, as the result of two coincidental errors canceling each other. In light of this we should, I think, refuse to say that I knew this truth on the basis of hearing that announcement.

The contrary evidence of which I am ignorant in this case is the fact that the announcer misread the sheet before her. Not only would this undermine my case for claiming knowledge were I to learn of it, but in just being there, unknown to me, it renders my claim to knowledge false. This is in contrast to the contrary evidence in the earlier example, where my ignorance of it did protect my assumption that I knew the outcome of the game. In both examples my ignorance shielded my justification for claiming to know, but only in the first did it also guard the truth of the claim (and so create the possibility of losing one piece of knowledge just by gaining another).

What in general is it that divides such cases, in which justification for claiming to know depends on not knowing about contrary evidence, into these two species? What feature of the relation between the already acquired justification and the unknown contrary evidence makes it one sort of case rather than the other? If we had an interesting general answer to this question, we would also have one to the question of what condition must be added to justified true belief in order to get a set of conditions sufficient for knowledge: this condition is just the non-existence of the sort (whatever it is) of unknown conflicting evidence that renders a justified knowledge claim false. The one question comes down to the other. It is a question that has received very extensive discussion in the last decade and a half. This discussion has not produced any interesting general answer that is compelling and widely agreed upon. The reason for this, I believe, is that the question has no interesting general answer.

One relevant suggestion, illustrated by the example given above, is this: Given a particular justification for a knowledge claim, contrary evidence that would render that claim false always differs from contrary evidence that would not do so because the subject’s justification for believing the proposition in question would be weakened much more by her learning of the first sort of contrary evidence than it would be by her learning of the second sort. This suggestion is a general answer to the question, all right, and it may well be correct, but it is not very interesting. It is not the revealing sort of answer that we would like to have. It is too meager in content. If this is all that can be said, then the general difference we are interested in is just a matter of the degree of something for which there is no principled way of determining the cutoff point. Whereas we would like it to be determined by some property of the contrary evidence, or its relation to the already possessed justification, that is always clearly present or clearly absent and it reveals some interesting epistemic principle, some interesting fact about the concept of knowledge. All that our unexciting point reveals about the concept of knowledge is that it is vague in yet another dimension.

Plausible candidates for more satisfying general answers are by now familiar. They are things like: the contrary evidence that falsifies the knowledge claim must entail that the subject’s justification includes a false belief or requires inference through a false premise; the contrary evidence must entail that the beliefs involved in the subject’s justification lack an appropriate sort of causal connection with the fact the subject is justified in claiming to know. I think, however, that the fact we have to face is that, although interesting conditions like these may work for special kinds of knowledge (for example, knowledge by inference or memory knowledge or restricted kinds of perceptual knowledge), none of them applies in every kind of case. If anything works at all across the board, it is just the fairly obvious point mentioned above. (Although this is not the interesting general answer that we would have liked to have, the fact that nothing more interesting holds, if it is a fact, is interesting.)

There is some support for this conclusion in the fact that in all the discussion of the question (of which I am aware) no interesting general answer has been proposed for which there is not a counterexample. But what clinches it is that one can construct examples in which nothing more interesting than the obvious point is available to serve as a general basis for the distinction. Consider the following situation. You are visiting a foreign city and come across a public market in which you see many stands piled up with fruits and vegetables. You walk up to one of the fruit stands and look over its enormous display of pears. Your eye lights on a particular pear and you think that it looks unusually delicious. You contemplate buying and eating it. You never question whether what you are looking at is a pear. Now, if this were a normal sort of fruit stand and you would know that what you are looking at is a pear. Let us suppose, however, that, although it is a pear and you are, of course, justified in your unquestioning confidence that it is, this fruit stand is out of the ordinary because 99 percent of the things surrounding that pear that look every bit as much like pears as it does are not pears but carefully painted wax
imitations, which it amuses this fruit vendor to put in place of the real pears that have been sold. Thus it is extremely lucky that what you are looking at is a pear and not a piece of wax, too lucky for your true belief that it is a pear—justified as it is merely by how the thing looks—to count as knowledge.

But now suppose that the circumstances had been somewhat different. Suppose that only 1 percent of the pear-looking things surrounding the one that has caught your eye were wax imitations and that 99 percent were real pears. In that case, surely, it would not be too fortunate that you happen to be looking at one of the real pears in the display for it to be said that you know that what you see is a pear.

Where, between 1 and 99 percent, does one draw the line, on one side of which you know and on the other you do not? No doubt everyone will want to draw it vaguely. There are likely to be differences of opinion about where even a vague boundary should be put. (I am inclined to say that the boundary has been crossed when as many as half of the surrounding pear-looking things are imitations.) The important point, however, is that the only relevant property separating the clear cases on one side from those on the other is the size of the ratio of imitation to genuine pears. There is no other interesting property the presence or absence of which explains why you know when the ratio is very small but fail to know when it is very large. There is only the degree of something. The only thing one can say is that the cases where you do not know that you see a pear differ from those where you do because in the first sort of case the contrary evidence of which you are ignorant (the fact that a percent of the pear-looking things in the display are imitations) would, if you became cognizant of it, damage your case for believing that you see a pear too much more than it would in the second sort of case (where the proportion of imitations is much smaller). It makes it too lucky that the basis you happen to have for assuming that you see a pear is a basis for a truth rather than a falsehood. The example offers no other way in which to make the distinction. It follows that this colorless sort of point is the strongest that can always be appealed to in order to distinguish unknown contrary evidence that falsifies a justified knowledge claim from such evidence that does not do thus but merely places one in a position to know less by knowing more.5

Notes
2. Ibid., pp. 148-49.
4. I offered a similar example to make a similar point in Knowledge, Perception, and Memory (Dordrecht, 1975), pp. 74-75.
5. It is not certain that even this unexciting sort of point always applies. It may be possible for there to be a pair of cases in which the subjects have justifications for claiming to know the same truth, there exists the same sort of evidence against this truth which would damage