Epistemic Closure in Context

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Abstract

The general principle of epistemic closure stipulates that epistemic properties are transmissible through logical means. According to this principle, an epistemic operator, say ε, should satisfy any valid scheme of inference, such as: if ε(p entails q), then ε(p) entails ε(q). The principle of epistemic closure under known entailment (ECKE), a particular instance of epistemic closure, has received a good deal of attention since the last thirty years or so. ECKE states that: if one knows that p entails q, and she knows that p, then she knows that q. It is widely accepted that ECKE constitutes an important piece of the skeptical argument, but the acceptance of an unrestricted version of ECKE is still a matter of debate. On the side of the defenders of ECKE, one finds Stine (1976), Brueckner (1985), Vogel (1990), and Feldman (1995). Others proposed a refutation or a limitation of the principle, like Dretske (1970), Nozick (1981), Hales (1995), Williams (1996), and Sosa (1999). As it turns out, the relevant alternatives view (RAV) elaborated by Dretske, which restricts the scope of ECKE, has been discussed extensively and acknowledged as one of the most important contributions. There is nonetheless a major unsolved difficulty pertaining to Dretske-RAV: the notion of relevant alternatives is defined in such a way that it is bounded by counterfactual possibilities. This ontological import leaves open the door to the skeptic. Some have tried to give more precision to this notion, like Stine (1976), who appealed to a Gricean approach to define relevant alternatives in conversational contexts. My proposal is in accordance with the gist of Dretske's strategy, i.e. to restrict the validity of ECKE, and I claim that in order to escape the difficulties inherent to RAV one has to introduce a more robust notion, the notion of epistemic context. Epistemic contexts are a subclass of propositional contexts. In that perspective, the closure property is expressed in terms of a property of a relation between epistemic contexts. ECKE holds when and only when either the epistemic context of the premises is the same as the epistemic context of the conclusion, or the epistemic context change between the premises and the conclusion is permissible. Permissibility of epistemic context change is a function of consistency. By means of this epistemic context approach, I will show that: (1) epistemic contexts are defined by basic propositions (unchallenged justified beliefs), (2) ECKE holds only under very specific constraints, and (3) the skeptical argument involves a non-permissible change of epistemic context and, by the same token, cannot rely upon ECKE.

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