

Précis of The Possibility of Knowledge

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An epistemological how-possible question asks how knowledge, or knowledge of some specific kind, is possible. Familiar epistemological how-possible questions include ‘How is knowledge of the external world possible?’, ‘How is knowledge of other minds possible?’ and ‘How is a priori knowledge possible?’. These are the three questions that I tackle in my book. In each case, I explain how and why the question arises and propose a way of answering it. The main negative claim of the book is that transcendental arguments are of little use in answering how-possible questions. A transcendental demonstration of the necessity of a certain kind of knowledge does not amount to an explanation of its possibility. The main positive claim is that such questions call for what I describe as a multi-levels response. I give an account of the multi-levels approach and put it to use in explaining how various different kinds of knowledge are possible.

Epistemological how-possible questions are not directly concerned with whether knowledge is possible but if we cannot explain how a certain kind of knowledge is possible then the reality of that kind of knowledge is called into question. How-possible questions are obstacle-dependent. We ask how knowledge of kind K is possible when we encounter factors that make it look impossible. So the question is: how is knowledge of kind K possible given the factors that make it look impossible? The more difficult the obstacles the more pressing the question, at least on the assumption that knowledge of kind K is possible. Scepticism about the possibility of this kind of knowledge is the view that the obstacles to its existence are insuperable. If we do not want to end up as sceptics we must show that the obstacles are not insuperable.

The first step towards explaining how knowledge of a certain kind is possible is to identify means by which it is possible. This is Level 1 of a multi-levels response. For example, suppose the question is:

(HP_{ew}) How is knowledge of the external world possible?

In order to answer this question we must first identify means by which it is possible for us to come to know things about the external world. On the face it there are many such means. I can know that the cup in front of me is chipped by seeing that it is chipped, feeling that it is chipped or being told that it is chipped. Why, in that case, is there even a question about the possibility of this kind of knowledge? Suppose we focus on perceptual means of knowing about the external world. The problem, according to philosophers such as Barry Stroud, is that while perception is an absolutely fundamental source of human knowledge there are certain apparently undeniable facts about perception that make it look as though it could not be a source of knowledge of the external world. Such alleged facts constitute the obstacles to knowledge that get addressed at Level 2 of a multi-levels response to (HP_{ew}). There are two ways of proceeding at this stage. One would be to show that the alleged obstacles to perceptual knowledge can be overcome. The other would be to show that they are not genuine obstacles. In my view, the latter obstacle-dissipating response is likely to be more effective than an obstacle-overcoming response.

Suppose that all has gone well up to this point. We have identified perception as a means of knowing about the external world and shown that there is nothing that stands in the way of our knowing about the world on this basis. Does anything more need to be done to answer (HP_{ew})? What further questions might we want to ask? Here is one possibility: assuming that we can gain knowledge of the external world by perceptual means, we might

ask what makes it possible for us to do this. This is a question about what I call enabling conditions for the acquisition of perceptual knowledge, and it takes us to Level 3 of a multi-levels response to (HP_{ew}).

Kant argues in the first Critique that the capacity to perceive spatial properties and to think by means of categorial concepts such as substance and causality are a priori enabling condition for the acquisition of perceptual knowledge of external objects. I argue in support of these Kantian claims. However, while I accept that (a) perceptual knowledge has a priori conditions, I do not accept that (b) the identification of such conditions is essential for the purposes of explaining how perceptual knowledge is possible. I call my view moderate anti-minimalism. Extreme anti-minimalism accepts both (a) and (b). Finally, a minimalist is someone who rejects both (a) and (b). The only enabling conditions whose existence the minimalist recognizes are a posteriori conditions, and he sees no reason why a satisfying response to (HP_{ew}) needs to say anything at all about such conditions.

In the concluding chapters of the book I apply the multi-levels framework to the problem of other minds and to the task of explaining how a priori knowledge is possible. I focus on perception as a means of acquiring knowledge of other minds. I show that there is nothing that stands in the way of our acquiring perceptual knowledge of other minds and give an account of what makes it possible to acquire knowledge of other minds in this way. In the chapter on a priori knowledge I draw attention to the sheer multiplicity of pathways to this kind of knowledge. I argue that reflection, reasoning and calculation are all sources of a priori knowledge, and that the acquisition of a priori knowledge by such means can be satisfactorily accounted for within a realist framework. Kant is wrong to think that we must be idealists if we want to explain how a priori knowledge is possible.

