Knowledge, Language, and Nonexistent Entities

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Abstract

In this paper, I apply the necessary conditions for knowledge to three different theories within the philosophy of language and argue that only one of the three stands up to a problem of knowledge involving nonexistent entities. I begin by briefly covering three commonly held necessary conditions for knowledge of which I focus mostly on the condition that a proposition must be true in order to know it. Then I consider theories of language given by Russell, Strawson, and Salmon. To each theory, I test whether the theory can make sense of a person knowing a proposition such as “Sherlock Holmes is a detective,” which includes a nonexistent entity as the subject. Based on their theories of language, I show that neither Russell nor Strawson are able to make sense of such sentences without either a concession in their respective theories or in their epistemology. Of the theories considered, only Salmon’s is able to adequately analyze sentences that have nonexistent entities as their subject. By doing this I show a relationship between the philosophy of language and epistemology, and I show how holding to a theory in one may force one to claim that a theory in the other is false.

Knowledge, Language, and Nonexistent Entities

In this paper, I apply the necessary conditions for knowledge to three different theories within the philosophy of language and argue that only one of the three stands up to a problem of knowledge involving nonexistent entities. I begin by briefly covering three commonly held necessary conditions for knowledge of which I focus mostly on the condition that a proposition must be true in order to know it. Then I consider theories of language given by Russell, Strawson, and Salmon. To each theory, I test whether the theory can make sense of a person knowing a proposition such as “Sherlock Holmes is a detective,” which includes a nonexistent entity as the subject. Based on their theories of language, I show that neither Russell nor Strawson are able to make sense of such sentences without either a concession in their respective theories or in their epistemology. Of the theories considered, only Salmon’s is able to adequately analyze sentences that have nonexistent entities as their subject. By doing this I show a relationship between the philosophy of language and epistemology, and I show how holding to a theory in one may force one to claim that a theory in the other is false.

To begin, let’s look at what the conditions are that make up knowledge. According to Ayer, the necessary and sufficient conditions for some subject S knowing some proposition P are (i) P is true, (ii) S believes that P is true, and (iii) S has the right to be sure that P is true. Condition (iii) simply means that S is justified in believing that P is true (Ayer 442). Gettier shows that Ayer’s conditions are not sufficient for knowledge through his use of “Gettier Cases,” and these cases leave the third condition uncertain and controversial (Gettier 444-446). However, the first two conditions remain generally accepted. Thus, if S knows that P, then P is true, and S believes that P is true.

For the purposes of this paper, I will only look at the first condition: If S knows that P, then P is true. This will form the basis of the test that I will use on the different theories in the philosophy of language. In particular, I will consider cases where P is a proposition that has a subject that does not
refer to anything in the real world. Such subjects include Sherlock Holmes, a phoenix, and the present king of France. The first theory I will consider is the one formulated by Bertrand Russell in his essay “On Denoting.”

Consider the following sentence:

(1) The present king of France is bald.

According to Russell, this sentence translates into three statements: (i) Something is presently a king of France; (ii) At most, one thing is presently a king of France; (iii) Whatever is presently a king of France is bald (Russell 232). The first two statements work to handle the “the” in the sentence. Russell claims that the “the” in the subject works to refer to one single thing in the world. To him, this means that in order to account for the “the” in his translation, statement (i) must be used to state that at least one thing exists that is presently a king of France. Statement (ii), then, states that no more than one thing exists that is presently a king of France. Finally, statement (iii) states that whatever the thing is that is denoted or referred to by the first two statements, that thing is bald.

Before we analyze sentence (1) to determine its truth-value, let’s first look at a simpler example. Take the following sentence: “The Huntington University mascot is a lumberjack.” Russell would analyze this sentence to make the following statements: (i) Something is presently a Huntington University mascot; (ii) At most, one thing is a Huntington University mascot; (iii) Whatever is presently a Huntington University mascot is a lumberjack. Now, according to Russell, the truth-value of the original sentence is determined by the truth-values of the translated statements. So in our mascot example, (i) is true because there is at least one Huntington University mascot. Statement (ii) is true because there is only one Huntington University mascot. Finally, (iii) is true because Huntington University’s mascot is, in fact, a lumberjack.

Now that we have determined the truth-value for the sentence in the simpler example, let’s return to the present king of France. In this example, it turns out that (i) is false because there is no present king of France. France is no longer a monarchy; therefore, it does not have a king. This means that sentence (1) as a whole is false. It does not matter if the other two statements are true; if even just one of them is false, the original sentence is false. This is because the statements (i), (ii), and (iii) are conjoined to make the original sentence. In other words, sentence (1) is true if and only if (i) is true, (ii) is true, and (iii) is true.

A problem arises, however, when the original sentence contains a subject that does not refer to anything. Consider the negation of sentence (1):

(1-) The present king of France is not bald.

Due to the Law of Excluded Middle, either a sentence or its negation must be true. Thus, either sentence (1) or sentence (1-) must be true. We already know that sentence (1) is false, so according to the Law of Excluded Middle, sentence (1-) must be true. Let’s check. Using Russell’s method, Sentence (1-) breaks down to the statements: (i) Something is presently a king of France; (ii) At most, one thing is presently a king of France; (iii) Whatever is a king of France is not bald. After analyzing sentence (1-) in this way, it turns out that the sentence is false because, once again, there is no present king of France. Thus, both (1) and (1-) are false, but this violates the Law of Excluded Middle. Therefore, it would appear that something is wrong with Russell’s analysis of the sentences (233).

Russell recognized this problem and explained that it arises due to a misunderstanding of the scope of the negation. He explains that there are two ways of understanding how sentence (1-) should be formulated. It should either be formulated as “The present king of France is not bald” or “It is not the case that the present king of France is bald.” He says that in the first formulation, “The
present king of France” is primary, and all sentences where a non-referring subject is primary are false. In the second formulation, “The present king of France” is secondary (Russell 236). This means that the main part, “The present king of France is bald,” is evaluated as usual. Then, the “It is not the case that” part changes the truth value of the sentence to the opposite of the main part. Thus, the main part is evaluated to be false, and the negation makes the sentence as a whole true. Under this conception of negation, Russell’s theory does not violate the Law of Excluded Middle.

Now, let’s see how Russell’s theory stands up to the knowledge test we devised above. According to the test, if S knows that P, then P is true. We will use the following proposition for this test:

(P1) The Minotaur is half man and half bull.

Now, let’s say that Jones knows that (P1). In other words, Jones knows that the Minotaur is half man and half bull. Using Russell’s theory, (P1) translates into the statements: (i) Something is a Minotaur; (ii) At most, one thing is a Minotaur; (iii) Whatever is a Minotaur is half man and half bull. Once again, statement (i) renders this proposition false because there is no Minotaur. Thus because (P1) is false, it must be false that Jones knows that (P1). Proposition (P1) simply states the definition of the Minotaur, though. It is the very definition of the Minotaur to be a creature that is half man and half bull. It seems that not only should (P1) be true, but Jones should be able to know the definition of the Minotaur. Furthermore, if we evaluate the negation of (P1), then the proposition “It is not the case that the Minotaur is half man and half bull” would be true and knowable to Jones. This also seems wrong, though, because it would then be knowable that the Minotaur is not that which it is.

Strawson responds to Russell in his paper “On Referring” and states that Russell’s understanding of sentence (1) is off the mark. According to Strawson, if someone were to presently make the statement “The present king of France is bald,” one’s reaction would not be to say that this sentence is false, but rather that there is no present king of France. The assertion that there is no present king of France does not contradict the statement that the present king of France is bald, nor does the assertion claim that the statement is false. The statement simply states that the truth or falsity of (1) does not even arise (Strawson 252).

Strawson makes the distinction between the sentence itself, the use of a sentence, and the utterance of a sentence. He claims that Russell’s mistake is that he claimed that sentences can be either true or false. Strawson denies this and claims that only the uses of sentences make true or false propositions. For example, Strawson would say that the sentence “The present king of France is bald” has no truth-value in and of itself. If Jones were to utter this sentence sometime in the past when France had a bald king, then his use of this sentence would form a true proposition. If Jones were to utter this sentence in the present day when there was not king of France, then his use of this sentence would form a false proposition (Strawson 249).

He connects this distinction to a distinction between an expression, a use of an expression, and an utterance of an expression. An expression in this case is simply the subject of a sentence. The connection is not perfect due to the fact that just the use of the expression “The present king of France” does not have a truth-value in and of itself. The use of an expression, however, does refer to something. Like a sentence itself not having a truth-value, an expression itself does not refer to anything. Only the use of an expression refers to something. Thus, when Jones says “The present king of France is bald” when there is no king of France, one does not say that the proposition is true or false because propositions are only true or false when the expressions that make them up actually refer to something (Strawson 249-252).

Now that we have a basic idea of Strawson’s theory, let’s apply it to the knowledge test. We shall use (P1) again in order to test the theory, so Jones knows that the Minotaur is half man and half bull. As has been explained above, it seems correct to say that Jones can actually know this since the
proposition simply tells what the Minotaur is. However, when we apply Strawson’s analysis of the proposition, it turns out that the proposition is neither true nor false. In fact, this does not even meet the requirements to be a proposition. A proposition must be either true or false, but according to Strawson’s theory, a proposition is only true or false when the expressions that make them up actually refer to something. The expression “The Minotaur” does not refer to anything because the Minotaur does not exist. Thus, according to Strawson, any sentence that contains the expression “The Minotaur” cannot be a proposition, and therefore, cannot have a truth value.

We have now gone over both Russell’s and Strawson’s theories of reference, and neither of them passed the knowledge test. Russell’s theory is incompatible with the standard view of a necessary condition for knowledge, specifically that in order to know a proposition, that proposition must be true. Likewise, Strawson’s theory is also incompatible with this necessary condition for knowledge, but his incompatibility is slightly different.

Russell has two options for resolving this problem. First, he can claim that the statement “Something is a Minotaur” is actually true. By doing this, he will be claiming that there is something out there that is a Minotaur. This would give the Minotaur a sort of ontological status. Whether it is some sort of fictional existence or actual existence, the Minotaur would gain existence of some sort, and thus, would gain some sort of ontological status. This will likely not be pleasing to him. Russell’s second option is to embrace the fact that we are able to know false propositions. If this is the case, though, then there would be no reason for me to say that I cannot know that 2 + 2 = 7. As long as I believe it, I can produce some sort of justification, and I can meet whatever other requirements there may be for knowledge, it seems that I can know that 2 + 2 = 7. At the very least, the fact that the proposition is not true cannot be a reason for my not knowing it. Also, if there are no other requirements for knowledge, this seems to bring knowledge down to mere strong belief. Of the two alternatives, the first appears to be less problematic overall.

Strawson also has two options for resolving his theory’s incompatibility with knowledge. First, like Russell, Strawson can admit that the Minotaur actually refers to something. Once again, this would give the Minotaur some sort of ontological status, which is a result that Strawson probably would not find preferable either. Strawson’s second option is also like Russell’s, only with a slight modification. While Strawson would have to deny that in order to know a proposition, it must be true, he does not have to embrace the idea that we are able to know false propositions. Instead, he can claim that knowable propositions must be non-false. This would include both true propositions and propositions that are neither true nor false. Out of the two options that Strawson has, the second one would be preferable for him.

Now that we have covered the theories of reference that have been developed by Russell and Strawson, let’s look briefly at one more theory: the one developed by Nathan Salmon. In his essay, “Nonexistence,” Salmon, like Russell, takes the stance that the use of a term as the subject of a proposition implies the existence of whatever it is that the term refers to. For example, consider the following sentence:

(2) Sherlock Holmes is a detective.

If this sentence is true, then the referent of “Sherlock Holmes” exists in some way. Unlike Russell, however, Salmon would evaluate this proposition to be true. According to him, when Conan Doyle wrote the Sherlock Holmes stories, he created an abstract artifact that, according to the stories, is a man named “Sherlock Holmes” (Salmon 300). Thus, sentence (2) should be understood as saying:

(2*) In the stories, Sherlock Holmes is a detective.
This invokes the world of the fiction to fix a referent for “Sherlock Holmes.”

Salmon further explains that there are four kinds of names that are considered to be non-referring. These are names that apply to future, past, possible, and impossible entities; names that refer to fictional entities; names that refer to mythical entities; and names that are thoroughly non-referring. Of these, only the names that are thoroughly non-referring do not refer to anything. The example of this that he gives is “Nappy,” the name for the actual present emperor of France (Salmon 306). Nappy does not exist at any point in reality, in fiction, or in myth. Nappy simply does not exist. Consider the following sentence:

(3) Nappy does not exist.

How could (3) be true, if “Nappy” truly does not refer to anything?

Salmon appeals to Gappy Proposition Theory to explain sentence (3). Gappy Proposition Theory translates propositions to the following form <Subject’s Semantic Content, Property held by the Subject>. Assuming existence to be a property that can be held by something, (3) would be translated as “<___, exists> is untrue” (Salmon 310). “___” is the subject’s semantic content because the name Nappy does not refer to anything, and this means that Nappy has no semantic content.

Now let’s see if Salmon’s theory passes the knowledge test. We will assume that Jones knows that Nappy does not exist. Because it is proposition (3) that Jones knows, we would translate this as we did above to the proposition “<___, exists> is untrue.” It is the nature of gappy propositions to always be false. Thus, when the gappy proposition is negated, a true proposition is formed. Therefore, proposition (3) is true, and Jones is able to know it.

As another example of Salmon’s theory passing the knowledge test, let’s assume that Jones knows that Sherlock Holmes is a detective. As I have already stated above, the proposition “Sherlock Holmes is a detective” translates into the proposition “In the fiction, Sherlock Holmes is a detective.” It is true that in the Sherlock Holmes fiction, Holmes is a detective. In other words, in the stories and in the fictional world that the stories constitute, the name “Sherlock Holmes” does refer to something, and the thing that the name refers to is a detective. Thus the proposition is true, and Jones is able to know it.

Salmon’s theory on nonexistent entities best handles the knowledge test that we devised above. Because his theory grants a type of existence to most nonreferential names, the names do end up referring to some sort of abstract entity. This allows propositions about nonexistent entities to be true, which gives people the ability to know them.
Works Cited


