Knowledge and Belief

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“We must recognize that when we know something we either do, or by reflecting, can know that our condition is one of knowing that thing, while when we believe something, we either do or can know that our condition is one of believing and not of knowing: so that we cannot mistake belief for knowledge or vice versa.”

This remark is worthy of investigation. Can I discover in myself whether I know something or merely believe it?

Let us begin by studying the ordinary usage of “know” and “believe.” Suppose, for example, that several of us intend to go for a walk and that you propose that we walk in Cascadilla Gorge. I protest that I should like to walk beside a flowing stream and that at this season the Gorge is probably dry. Consider the following cases:

(1) You say “I believe that it won’t be dry although I have no particular reason for thinking so.” If we went to the gorge and found a flowing stream we should not say that you knew that there would be water but that you thought so and were right.

(2) You say “I believe that it won’t be dry because it rained only three days ago and usually water flows in the gorge for at least that long after a rain.” If we found water we should be inclined to say that you knew that there would be water. It would be quite natural for you to say “I knew that it wouldn’t be dry”; and we should tolerate your remark. This case differs from the previous one in that here you had a reason.

(3) You say “I know that it won’t be dry” and give the same reason as in (2). If we found water we should have very little hesitation in saying that you knew. Not only had you a reason, but you said “I know” instead of “I believe.” It may seem to us that the latter should not make a difference—but it does.

(4) You say “I know that it won’t be dry” and give a stronger reason, e.g., “I saw a lot of water flowing in the gorge when I passed it this morning.” If we went and found water, there would be no hesitation at all in saying that you knew. If, for example, we later met someone who said “Weren’t you surprised to see water in the gorge this afternoon?” you would reply “No, I knew that there would be water; I had been there earlier in the day.” We should have no objection to this statement.

(5) Everything happens as in (4), except that upon going to the gorge we find it to be dry. We should not say that you knew, but that you believed that there would be water. And this is true even though you declared that you knew, and even though your evidence was the same as it was in case (4) in which you did know.

I wish to make some comments on the usage of “know,” “knew,” “believe,” and “believed,” as illustrated in the preceding cases:

(a) Whether we should say that you knew, depends in part on whether you had grounds for your assertion and on the strength of those grounds. There would certainly be less hesitation to say that you knew in case (4) than in case (3), and this can be due only to the difference in the strength of the grounds.

(b) Whether we should say that you knew, depends in part on how confident you were. In case (2), if you had said “It rained only three days ago and usually water flows in the gorge for at least that long after a rain; but, of course, I don’t feel absolutely sure that there will be water,” then we should not have said that you knew that there would be wa-
ter. If you lack confidence that $p$ is true, then others do not say that you know that $p$ is true, even though they know that $p$ is true. Being confident is a necessary condition for knowing.

(c) Prichard says that if we reflect we cannot mistake belief for knowledge. In case (4) you knew that there would be water, and in case (5) you merely believed it. Was there any way that you could have discovered by reflection, in case (5), that you did not know? It would have been useless to have reconsid- ered your grounds for saying that there would be water, because in case (4), where you did know, your grounds were identical. They could be at fault in (5) only if they were at fault in (4), and they were not at fault in (4). Cases (4) and (5) differ in only one respect—namely, that in one case you did subsequently find water and in the other you did not. Prichard says that we can determine by reflection whether we know something or merely believe it. But where, in these cases, is the material that reflection would strike upon? There is none.

There is only one way that Prichard could defend his position. He would have to say that in case (4) you did not know that there would be water. And it is obvious that he would have said this. But this is false. It is an enormously common usage of language to say, in commenting upon just such an incident as (4), “He knew that the gorge wouldn’t be dry because he had seen water flowing there that morning.” It is a usage that all of us are familiar with. We so employ “know” and “knew” every day of our lives. We do not think of our usage as being loose or incorrect—and it is not. As philosophers we may be surprised to observe that it can be that the knowledge that $p$ is true should differ from the belief that $p$ is true only in the respect that in one case $p$ is true and in the other false. But that is the fact.

There is an argument that one is inclined to use as a proof that you did not know that there would be water. The argument is the following: It could have turned out that you found no water; if it had so turned out you would have been mistaken in saying that you would find water; therefore you could have been mistaken; but if you could have been mistaken then you did not know.

Now it certainly could have turned out that the gorge was quite dry when you went there, even though you saw lots of water flowing through it only a few hours before. This does not show, however, that you did not know that there would be water. What it shows is that although you knew you could have been mistaken. This would seem to be a contradictory result; but it is not. It seems so because our minds are fixed upon another usage of “know” and “knew”; one in which “It could have turned out that I was mis- taken,” implies “I did not know.”

When is “know” used in this sense? I believe that Prichard uses it in this sense when he says that when we go through the proof of the proposition that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles we know that the proposition is true (p. 89). He says that if we put to ourselves the question: Is our condition one of knowing this, or is it only one of being convinced of it? then “We can only answer ‘Whatever may be our state on other occasions, here we are knowing this.’ And this statement is an expression of our knowing that we are knowing; for we do not believe that we are knowing this, we know that we are” (p. 89). He goes on to say that if someone were to object that we might be making a mistake “because for all we know we can later on discover some fact which is incompatible with a triangle’s having angles that are equal to two right angles, we can answer that we know that there can be no such fact, for in knowing that a triangle must have such angles we also know that nothing can exist which is incompatible with this fact” (p. 90).

It is easy to imagine a non-philosophical context in which it would have been natural for Prichard to have said “I know that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles.” Suppose that a young man just beginning the study of geometry was in doubt as to whether that proposition is true, and had even constructed an ingenious argument that appeared to prove it false. Sup-
pose that Prichard was unable to find any error in the argument. He might have said to the young man: "There must be an error in it. I know that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles."

When Prichard says that "nothing can exist which is incompatible with" the truth of that proposition, is he prophesying that no one will ever have the ingenuity to construct a flawless-looking argument against it? I believe not. When Prichard says that "we" know (and implies that he knows) that the proposition is true and know that nothing can exist that is incompatible with its being true, he is not making any prediction as to what the future will bring in the way of arguments or measurements. On the contrary, he is asserting that nothing that the future might bring could ever count as evidence against the proposition. He is implying that he would not call anything "evidence" against it. He is using "know" in what I shall call its "strong" sense. "Know" is used in this sense when a person's statement "I know that $p$ is true" implies that the person who makes the statement would look upon nothing whatever as evidence that $p$ is false.

It must not be assumed that whenever "know" is used in connection with mathematical propositions it is used in the strong sense. A great many people have heard of various theorems of geometry, e.g., the Pythagorean. These theorems are a part of "common knowledge." If a schoolboy doing his geometry assignment felt a doubt about the Pythagorean theorem, and said to an adult "Are you sure that it is true?" the latter might reply "Yes, I know that it is." He might make this reply even though he could not give proof of it and even though he had never gone through a proof of it. If subsequently he was presented with a "demonstration" that the theorem is false, or if various persons reputed to have a knowledge of geometry soberly assured him that it is false, he might be filled with doubt or even be convinced that he was mistaken. When he said "Yes, I know that it is true," he did not pledge himself to hold to the theorem through thick and thin. He did not absolutely exclude the possibility that something could prove it to be false. I shall say that he used "know" in the "weak" sense.

Consider another example from mathematics of the difference between the strong and weak senses of "know." I have just now rapidly calculated that 92 times 16 is 1472. If I had done this in the commerce of daily life where a practical problem was at stake, and if someone had asked "Are you sure that $92 \times 16 = 1472?" I might have answered "I know that it is; I have just now calculated it." But also I might have answered "I know that it is; but I will calculate it again to make sure." And here my language points to a distinction. I say that I know that $92 \times 16 = 1472$. Yet I am willing to confirm it—that is, there is something that I should call "making sure"; and, likewise, there is something that I should call "finding out that it is false." If I were to do this calculation again and obtain the result that $92 \times 16 = 1372$, and if I were to carefully check this latter calculation without finding any error, I should be disposed to say that I was previously mistaken when I declared that $92 \times 16 = 1472$. Thus when I say that I know that $92 \times 16 = 1472$, I allow for the possibility of a refutation; and so I am using "know" in its weak sense.

Now consider propositions like $2 + 2 = 4$ and $7 + 5 = 12$. It is hard to think of circumstances in which it would be natural for me to say that I know that $2 + 2 = 4$, because no one ever questions it. Let us try to suppose, however, that someone whose intelligence I respect argues that certain developments in arithmetic have shown that $2 + 2$ does not equal 4. He writes out a proof of this in which I can find no flaw. Suppose that his demeanor showed me that he was in earnest. Suppose that several persons of normal intelligence became persuaded that his proof was correct and that $2 + 2$ does not equal 4. What would be my reaction? I should say "I can't see what is wrong with your proof; but it is wrong, because I know that $2 + 2 = 4." Here I should be using "know" in its strong sense. I should not admit that any argument or any future de-
development in mathematics could show that it is false that \(2 + 2 = 4\).

The propositions \(2 + 2 = 4\) and \(92 \times 16 = 1472\) do not have the same status. There can be a demonstration that \(2 + 2 = 4\). But a demonstration would be for me (and for any average person) only a curious exercise, a sort of **game**. We have no serious interest in proving that proposition.\(^3\) It does not need a proof. It stands without one, and would not fall if a proof went against it. The case is different with the proposition that \(92 \times 16 = 1472\). We take an interest in the demonstration (calculation) because the proposition depends upon its demonstration. A calculation may lead me to reject it as false. But \(2 + 2 = 4\) does not depend on its demonstration. It does not depend on anything! And in the calculation that proves that \(92 \times 16 = 1472\), there are steps that do not depend on any calculation (e.g., \(2 \times 6 = 12; 5 + 2 = 7; 5 + 9 = 14\)).

There is a correspondence between this dualism in the logical status of mathematical propositions and the two senses of “know.” When I use “know” in the weak sense I am prepared to let an investigation (demonstration, calculation) determine whether the something that I claim to know is true or false. When I use “know” in the strong sense I am not prepared to look upon anything as an investigation; I do not concede that anything whatsoever could prove me mistaken; I do not regard the matter as open to any question; I do not admit that my proposition could turn out to be false, that any future investigation could refute it or cast doubt on it.\(^4\)

We have been considering the strong sense of “know” in its application to mathematical propositions. Does it have application anywhere in the realm of **empirical** propositions—for example, to propositions that assert or imply that certain physical things exist? Descartes said that we have a “moral assurance” of the truth of some of the latter propositions but that we lack a “metaphysical certainty.”\(^5\) Locke said that the perception of the existence of physical things is not “so certain as our intuitive knowledge, or the deductions of our reason” although “it is an assurance that deserves the name of knowledge.”\(^6\) Some philosophers have held that when we make judgments of perception such as that there are peonies in the garden, cows in the field, or dishes in the cupboard, we are “taking for granted” that the peonies, cows, and dishes exist, but not knowing it in the “strict” sense. Others have held that all empirical propositions, including judgments of perception, are merely hypotheses.\(^7\) The thought behind this exaggerated mode of expression is that any empirical proposition whatever could be refuted by future experience—that is, it could turn out to be false. Are these philosophers right?

Consider the following propositions:

(i) The sun is about ninety million miles from the earth.
(ii) There is a heart in my body.
(iii) Here is an ink-bottle.

In various circumstances I should be willing to assert of each of these propositions that I know it to be true. Yet they differ strikingly. This I see when, with each, I try to imagine the possibility that it is false.

(i) If in ordinary conversation someone said to me “The sun is about twenty million miles from the earth, isn’t it?” I should reply “No, it is about ninety million miles from us.” If he said “I think that you are confusing the sun with Polaris,” I should reply “I know that ninety million miles is roughly the sun’s distance from the earth.” I might invite him to verify the figure in an encyclopedia. A third person who overheard our conversation could quite correctly report that I knew the distance to the sun, whereas the other man did not. But this knowledge of mine is little better than hearsay. I have seen that figure mentioned in a few books. I know nothing about the observations and calculations that led astronomers to accept it. If tomorrow a group of eminent astronomers announced that a great error had been made and that the correct figure is twenty million miles, I should not insist that they were wrong. It would surprise me that such an enormous mistake could have been made.
But I should no longer be willing to say that I know that ninety million is the correct figure. Although I should now claim that I know the distance to be about ninety million miles, it is easy for me to envisage the possibility that some future investigation will prove this to be false.

(ii) Suppose that after a routine medical examination the excited doctor reports to me that the X-ray photographs show that I have no heart. I should tell him to get a new machine. I should be inclined to say that the fact that I have a heart is one of the few things that I can count on as absolutely certain. I can feel it beat. I know it’s there. Furthermore, how could my blood circulate if I didn’t have one? Suppose that later on I suffer a chest injury and undergo a surgical operation. Afterwards the astonished surgeons solemnly declare that they searched my chest cavity and found no heart, and that they made incisions and looked about in other likely places but found it not. They are convinced that I am without a heart. They are unable to understand how circulation can occur without what accounts for the thumping in my chest. But they are in agreement and obviously sincere, and they have clear photographs of my interior spaces. What would be my attitude? Would it be to insist that they were all mistaken? I think not. I believe that I should eventually accept their testimony and the evidence of the photographs. I should consider to be false what I now regard as an absolute certainty.

(iii) Suppose that as I write this paper someone in the next room were to call out to me “I can’t find an ink-bottle; is there one in the house?” I should reply “Here is an ink-bottle.” If he said in a doubtful tone “Are you sure? I looked there before,” I should reply “Yes, I know there is; come and get it.”

Now could it turn out to be false that there is an ink-bottle directly in front of me on this desk? Many philosophers have thought so. They would say that many things could happen of such a nature that if they did happen it would be proved that I am deceived. I agree that many extraordinary things could happen, in the sense that there is no logical absurdity in the supposition. It could happen that when I next reach for this ink-bottle my hand should seem to pass through it and I should not feel the contact of any object. It could happen that in the next moment the ink-bottle will suddenly vanish from sight; or that I should find myself under a tree in the garden with no ink-bottle about; or that one or more persons should enter this room and declare with apparent sincerity that they see no ink-bottle on this desk; or that a photograph taken now of the top of the desk clearly show all of the objects on it except the ink-bottle. Having admitted that these things could happen, am I compelled to admit that if they did happen then it would be proved that there is no ink-bottle here now? Not at all! I could say that when my hand seemed to pass through the ink-bottle I should then be suffering from hallucination; that if the ink-bottle suddenly vanished it would have miraculously ceased to exist; that the other persons were conspiring to drive me mad, or were themselves victims of remarkable concurrent hallucinations; that the camera possessed some strange flaw or that there was trickery in developing the negative. I admit that in the next moment I could find myself under a tree or in the bathtub. But this is not to admit that it could be revealed in the next moment that I am now dreaming. For what I admit is that I might be instantaneously transported to the garden, but not that in the next moment I might wake up in the garden. There is nothing that could happen to me in the next moment that I should call “waking up”; and therefore nothing that could happen to me in the next moment would be accepted by me now as proof that I now dream.

Not only do I not have to admit that those extraordinary occurrences would be evidence that there is no ink-bottle here; the fact is that I do not admit it. There is nothing whatever that could happen in the next moment or the next year that would by me be called evidence that there is not an ink-bottle here now. No future experience or investigation could prove to me that I am mistaken. Therefore, if I were to say “I know that there
is an ink-bottle here,” I should be using “know” in the strong sense.

It will appear to some that I have adopted an unreasonable attitude toward that statement. There is, however, nothing unreasonable about it. It seems so because one thinks that the statement that here is an ink-bottle must have the same status as the statements that the sun is ninety million miles away and that I have a heart and that there will be water in the gorge this afternoon. But this is a prejudice.

In saying that I should regard nothing as evidence that there is no ink-bottle here now, I am not predicting what I should do if various astonishing things happened. If other members of my family entered this room and, while looking at the top of this desk, declared with apparent sincerity that they see no ink-bottle, I might fall into a swoon or become mad. I might even come to believe that there is not and has not been an ink-bottle here. I cannot foretell with certainty how I should react. But if it is not a prediction, what is the meaning of my assertion that I should regard nothing as evidence that there is no ink-bottle here?

That assertion describes my present attitude toward the statement that here is an ink-bottle. It does not prophesy what my attitude would be if various things happened. My present attitude toward that statement is radically different from my present attitude toward those other statements (e.g., that I have a heart). I do now admit that certain future occurrences would disprove the latter. Whereas no imaginable future occurrence would be considered by me now as proving that there is not an ink-bottle here.

These remarks are not meant to be autobiographical. They are meant to throw light on the common concepts of evidence, proof, and disproof. Every one of us upon innumerable occasions of daily life takes this same attitude toward various statements about physical things, e.g., that here is a torn page, that this dish is broken, that the thermometer reads 70, that no rug is on the floor. Furthermore, the concepts of proof, disproof, doubt, and conjecture require us to take this attitude. In order for it to be possible that any statements about physical things should turn out to be false it is necessary that some statements about physical things cannot turn out to be false.

This will be made clear if we ask ourselves the question, When do we say that something turned out to be false? When do we use those words? Someone asks you for a dollar. You say “There is one in this drawer.” You open the drawer and look, but it is perfectly empty. Your statement turned out to be false. This can be said because you discovered an empty drawer. It could not be said if it were only probable that the drawer is empty or were still open to question. Would it make sense to say “I had better make sure that it is empty; perhaps there is a dollar in it after all?” Sometimes; but not always. Not if the drawer lies open before your eyes. That remark is the prelude to a search. What search can there be when the emptiness of the drawer confronts you? In certain circumstances there is nothing that you would call “making sure” that the drawer is empty; and likewise nothing that you would call “its turning out to be false” that the drawer is empty. You made sure that the drawer is empty. One statement about physical things turned out to be false only because you made sure of another statement about physical things. The two concepts cannot exist apart. Therefore, it is impossible that every statement about physical things could turn out to be false.

In a certain important respect some a priori statements and some empirical statements possess the same logical character. The statements that $5 \times 5 = 25$ and that here is an ink-bottle, both lie beyond the reach of doubt. On both, my judgment and reasoning rests. If you could somehow undermine my confidence in either, you would not teach me caution. You would fill my mind with chaos! I could not even make conjectures if you took away those fixed points of certainty; just as a man cannot try to climb whose body has no support. A conjecture implies an understanding of what certainty would be. If it is not a certainty that $5 \times 5 = 25$
and that here is an ink-bottle, then I do not understand what it is. You cannot make me doubt either of these statements or treat them as hypotheses. You cannot persuade me that future experience could refute them. With both of them it is perfectly unintelligible to me to speak of a "possibility" that they are false. This is to say that I know both of them to be true, in the strong sense of "know." And I am inclined to think that the strong sense of "know" is what various philosophers have had in mind when they have spoken of "perfect," "metaphysical," or "strict certainty."10

It will be thought that I have confused a statement about my "sensations," or my "sense-data," or about the way something looks or appears to me, with a statement about physical things. It will be thought that the things that I have said about the statement "Here is an ink-bottle" could be true only if that statement is interpreted to mean something like "There appears to me to be an ink-bottle here," i.e., interpreted so as not to assert or imply that any physical thing exists. I wish to make it clear that my statement "Here is an ink-bottle" is not to be interpreted in that way. It would be utterly fantastic for me in my present circumstances to say "There appears to me to be an ink-bottle here."

If someone were to call me on the telephone and say that he urgently needed an ink-bottle I should invite him to come here and get this one. If he said that it was extremely urgent that he should obtain one immediately and that he could not afford to waste time going to a place where there might not be one, I should tell him that it is an absolute certainty that there is one here, that nothing could be more certain, that it is something I absolutely guarantee. But if my statement "there is an ink-bottle here" were a statement about my "sensations" or "sense-data," or if it meant that there appears to me to be an ink-bottle here or that something here looks to me like an ink-bottle, and if that is all that I meant by it—then I should react quite differently to his urgent request. I should say that there is probably an ink-bottle here but that I could not guarantee it, and that if he needs one very desperately and at once then he had better look elsewhere. In short, I wish to make it clear that my statement "Here is an ink-bottle" is strictly about physical things and not about "sensations," "sense-data," or "appearances."11

Let us go back to Prichard's remark that we can determine by reflection whether we know something or merely believe it. Prichard would think that "knowledge in the weak sense" is mere belief and not knowledge. This is wrong. But if we let ourselves speak this way, we can then see some justification for Prichard's remark. For then he would be asserting, among other things, that we can determine by reflection whether we know something in the strong sense or in the weak sense. This is not literally true; however, there is this truth in it—that reflection can make us realize that we are using "I know it" in the strong (or weak) sense in a particular case. Prichard says that reflection can show us that "our condition is one of knowing" a certain thing, or instead that "our condition is one of believing and not of knowing" that thing. I do not understand what could be meant here by "our condition." The way I should put it is that reflection on what we should think if certain things were to happen may make us realize that we should (or should not) call those things "proof" or "evidence" that what we claim to know is not so. I have tried to show that the distinction between strong and weak knowledge does not run parallel to the distinction between a priori and empirical knowledge but cuts across it, i.e., these two kinds of knowledge may be distinguished within a priori knowledge and within empirical knowledge.

Reflection can make me realize that I am using "know" in the strong sense; but can reflection show me that I know something in the strong sense (or in the weak)? It is not easy to state the logical facts here. On the one hand, if I make an assertion of the form "I know that p" it does not follow that p, whether or not I am using "know" in the strong sense. If I have said to someone outside my room "Of course, I know that Fred-
die is in here,” and I am speaking in the strong sense, it does not follow that Freddie is where I claim he is. This logical fact would not be altered even if I realized that I was using “know” in the strong sense. My reflection on what I should say if . . . cannot show me that I know something. From the fact that I should not call anything “evidence” that Freddie is not here, it does not follow that he is here; therefore, it does not follow that I know he is here.

On the other hand, in an actual case of my using “know” in the strong sense, I cannot envisage a possibility that what I say to be true should turn out to be not true. If I were speaking of another person’s assertion about something, I could think both that he is using “know” in the strong sense and that nonetheless what he claims he knows to be so might turn out to be not so. But in my own case I cannot have this conjunction of thoughts, and this is a logical and not a psychological fact. When I say that I know something to be so, using “know” in the strong sense, it is unintelligible to me (although perhaps not to others) to suppose that anything could prove that it is not so and, therefore, that I do not know it.12

NOTES


2. Some readers seem to have thought that I was denying here that “I knew that p.” That was not my intention, and my words do not have that implication. If I had said “although you knew you were mistaken,” I should have denied the above entailment and, also, I should have misused “knew.” The difference between the strong and weak senses of “know” (and “knew”) is not that this entailment holds for the strong but not for the weak sense. It holds for both. If it is false that p, then one does not (and did not) know that p.

3. Some logicians and philosophers have taken an interest in proving that 2 + 2 = 4 (e.g., G. W. Leibniz, New Essays on the Understanding, (Lasalle, Ill: Open Court Publishing Co., 1949), Bk. IV, ch. 7, sec. 10; G. Frege, The Foundations of Arithmetic (Oxford: Blackwell, 1950), trans. J. L. Austin, sec. 6). They have wished to show that it can be deduced from certain premises, and to determine what premises and rules of inference are required in the deduction. Their interest has not been in the outcome of the deduction.

4. Compare these remarks about the strong sense of “know” with some of Locke’s statements about “intuitive knowledge”: “. . . in this the mind is at no pains of proving or examining. . . .” “This part of knowledge . . . leaves no room for hesitation, doubt, or examination. . . .” It is on this intuition that depends all the certainty and evidence of all our knowledge; which certainly every one finds to be so great, that he cannot imagine, and therefore not require a greater. . . .” Locke, Essay, Bk. IV, ch. 2, sec. 1.

5. Descartes, Discourse on the Method, Part IV.


8. My viewpoint is somewhat different here from what it is in “The Verification Argument.” There I am concerned with bringing out the different ways in which such a remark as “these things could happen” can be taken. I wish to show, furthermore, that from none of the senses in which the remark is true does it follow that it is not certain that the things in question will not happen. Finally, I hold there, that it is perfectly certain that they will not happen. Here, I am not disagreeing with any of those points, but I am adding the further point that my admission that, in some sense, the things could happen, does not require me to admit that if they were to happen, that would be evidence that there is no inkbottle here now.

9. The word “attitude” is not very satisfactory, but I cannot think of another noun that would do the trick. By “my attitude” I mean, here, what I should say and think if various things were to happen. By “my present attitude” I mean what I should say and think now, when I imagine those things as happening, in contrast with what I should say and—think at some future time if those things actually did happen at that time. It is this distinction that shows that my description of “my present attitude” is not a prophecy.

10. Descartes, for example, apparently took as his criterion for something’s being “entirely certain” that he could not imagine in it the least ground of doubt: “. . . je pensai qu’il fallait . . . que je retasse comme absolu- ment faux tout ce en quoi je pourrais imaginer le moindre doute, afin de voir s’il ne me resterait point après cela quelque chose en ma créance qui fut entièrement indubitable” (Discourse, Part IV). And Locke (as previously noted) said of “intuitive knowledge” that one cannot imagine a greater certainty, and that it leaves no room for hesitation, doubt, or examination (Essay, Bk. IV, ch. 2, sec. 1).

11. The remainder of the essay is newly written. The original conclusion was wrongly stated. The reader is referred to the following exchange between Richard Taylor and myself, in respect to the original paper: Taylor, “A Note on Knowledge and Belief,” Analysis, XIII, June 1953; Malcolm, “On Knowledge and Belief,” Analysis, XIV, March 1954; Taylor, “Rejoinder to Mr. Malcolm,” Analysis, XIV, March 1954.
12. This is the best summary I can give of what is wrong and right in Prichard’s claim that one can determine by reflection whether one knows something or merely believes it. A good part of the ideas in this essay were provoked by conversations with Wittgenstein. A brief and rough account of those talks is to be found in my Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 87–92. Jaakko Hintikka provides an acute treatment of the topic of “knowing that one knows,” with special reference to Prichard’s claim. See his Knowledge and Belief (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), ch. 5.

Skepticism

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The skeptic about knowledge argues that we know very little or nothing of what we think we know, or at any rate that this position is no less reasonable than the belief in knowledge.* The history of philosophy exhibits a number of different attempts to refute the skeptic: to prove him wrong or show that in arguing against knowledge he presupposes there is some and so refutes himself. Others attempt to show that accepting skepticism is unreasonable, since it is more likely that the skeptic’s extreme conclusion is false than that all of his premisses are true, or simply because reasonableness of belief just means proceeding in an anti-skeptical way. Even when these counterarguments satisfy their inventors, they fail to satisfy others, as is shown by the persistent attempts against skepticism.† The continuing felt need to refute skepticism, and the difficulty in doing so, attests to the power of the skeptic’s position, the depth of his worries.

An account of knowledge should illuminate skeptical arguments and show wherein lies their force. If the account leads us to reject these arguments, this had better not happen too easily or too glibly. To think the skeptic overlooks something obvious, to attribute to him a simple mistake or confusion or fallacy, is to refuse to acknowledge the power of his position and the grip it can have upon us. We thereby cheat ourselves of the opportunity to reap his insights and to gain self-knowledge in understanding why his arguments lure us so. Moreover, in fact, we cannot lay the specter of skepticism to rest without first hearing what it shall unfold.

Our goal is not, however, to refute skepticism, to prove it is wrong or even to argue that it is wrong. In the Introduction we distinguished between philosophy that attempts to prove, and philosophy that attempts to explain how something is possible. Our task here is to explain how knowledge is possible, given what the skeptic says that we do accept (for example, that it is logically possible that we are dreaming or are floating in the tank). In doing this, we need not convince the skeptic, and we may introduce explanatory hypotheses that he would reject. What is important for our task of explanation and understanding is that we find those hypotheses acceptable or plausible, and that they show us how the existence of knowledge fits together with the logical

*Nozick’s conditions for knowledge are to be found on pages 26–37 of this volume.