Is the Definition of Knowledge Circular?

IN defining the criteria of knowledge Woozley says that " knowing involves : (i) that what is known is true ; (ii) that the person knowing is sure that it is true. However, although these are necessary conditions, they are not yet sufficient, for it would not be difficult to think of situations in which both conditions were fulfilled and yet one could not truly be said to know."[1] He then proceeds to give these further conditions of knowledge : " To know then, a man must (a) have evidence ; (b) be right about the evidence ; and (c) be right about the relation of the evidence to the conclusion."[2]

Now I propose to show in this paper that these latter conditions (b) and (c), which are deemed necessary to knowledge, are, as stated, circumlocutions which conceal the fact that what is really required by them is (1) a knowledge of the propositions comprising the evidence for p (the proposition claimed to be known) as well as (2) a knowledge of the fact that these propositions constituting the evidence are relevant to the truth of p and do in fact entail (causally or logically) p. I would try to show that where the claim to knowledge is based on evidence, anything short of the knowledge of the propositions comprising the evidence and the knowledge of the fact that they entail what is claimed to be known, not merely vitiates but nullifies the claim to knowledge. If so, it would seem that Woozley's attempt or in fact any attempt to define knowledge in terms of evidence is circular in view of the fact that according to this account knowing p is defined in terms of knowing the evidence for p and certain implications of this evidence. I would not, however, draw the moral that the definition of knowledge in terms of evidence is therefore a total failure or that it obscures the true nature of knowledge, although I shall not attempt any positive definition of knowledge in this paper.

Before I come to my main point I would like to examine Woozley's condition (a). As quoted above he says that " to know a man must have evidence." This can be interpreted to mean that no claim to knowledge is valid unless at least what is claimed to be known is based on some evidence. I shall examine this interpretation below but it would appear from Woozley's example of a claim to know on no evidence that this is possibly not what

1. **Theory of Knowledge**, p. 191. In a later article on " Knowing and Not Knowing " in **Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society (New Series),** Vol. LIII, pp. 150-172, he somewhat alters his position with regard to criterion (ii) by trying to show that it is a mistake to think that a man cannot know something unless he is sure of it.

2. **ibid.**

he means. If his illustration is to throw light on his meaning then what he probably means to say is that no claim to knowledge is valid when what is claimed as evidence for what is known is no evidence at all since it cannot be seriously considered as evidence.

Let us consider his example of " the pessimist who claims to know that his fireworks party will be spoiled by rain." Woozley contends that in spite of this claim and in spite of the fact that it may rain for this fireworks display the pessimist does not know because he has no evidence for saying so. But would it be correct to say that from the pessimist's point of view he has no evidence at all for his claim to know ? I think we have to distinguish between a claim to knowledge on no evidence at all and the claim to knowledge on ostensible grounds which are no grounds at all. The former claim would be that of a person who claims to know something but when asked for the evidence on which his claim to knowledge is based answers that there is no evidence, while the latter would be that of a person who claims to know something and when asked for the evidence produces the evidence, which all or most people (excluding him, of course) would reject as being no evidence. Now Woozley's example seems to depict a situation in this latter category for if his pessimist quite seriously meant what he said (and was'nt trying to be humourous not quite meaning what he said) he may argue as follows. He may say that the turn of events in nature supports the hypothesis of pessimism and that in general most attempts on the parts of humans to be happy are thwarted by nature and that since on the last so many occasions when he tried to have a fireworks display it rained, he had strong grounds for asserting that it will rain on this occasion as well and he was proved right. Now it is worth noting that if a fair number of us had similar experiences and were pessimists we would be inclined to regard all this not merely as evidence but as valid evidence. In other words, in such a situation the dividing line between having no evidence, having wrong evidence and having valid evidence would be rather thin. It is also worth stressing that such situations need not be purely hypothetical. They can occur in a science where there is a strong division of opinion among the experts about the validity of a view and the relevance or not of certain propositions as tending to establish this validity. So if the criterion that " to know we must have evidence " is interpreted to mean that when X's evidence is no evidence X's claim to knowledge is invalid, we have to grant that there are situations in which the application of this criterion is arbitrary and of little value in distinguishing knowledge from error. Another point that is not clear is that if this is what is meant by condition (a), namely that when what is claimed as evidence is no evidence the claim to knowledge is invalid, this condition

would not be very different from that of (b) which covers cases where one has evidence but is wrong about the evidence.

This brings us to the first interpretation as being logically the one that should be preferred, namely that what is meant by saying that "to know a man must have evidence" is that no claim to knowledge is valid where the claimant has no evidence in the sense that he adduces or can adduce no evidence for what he claims to know. Now if this were the valid interpretation it seems to me to be clearly false for all self-evident propositions claimed to be known as self-evident would surely be known without evidence since it would be self-contradictory to speak of the evidence for a self-evident proposition and thus to talk of the evidence of a self-evident proposition is analytically ruled out.

But are there any propositions apart from these which one may rightly claim to know without adducing or being able to adduce evidence ? One should think not, except for the fact that "hunches" or "intuitions" may sometimes tend to fall into this category. Suppose someone were to make consistently correct predictions without being able to say just how he comes to make them except that whenever he entertains or contemplates what he asserts as a prediction there is an impelling sense of certainty that what he says is true. Now supposing he makes these predictions for a considerably long period without ever being in error, wouldnt there be a tendency to say that so-and-so knows the future or at least that so-and-so knew that such-and-such things would happen. And what is there to prevent someone from arguing that since the words ' know ' ' knew ' are or can be significantly used in such contexts, any theory of knowing must take this into account in formulating the criteria of knowledge. To take a less hypothetical example would we say (as some do) that Ramanujan, the mathematician, knew by intuition certain theorems which were later proved by Hardy, although he may not have been able to prove them himself ? We find here a strong tendency to say that such " intuitions " etc. are instances of knowledge in virtue of not only their certainty and veracity but that even though there seems to be no evident method by which they were arrived at they are so profound and unexpectedly accurate that chance seems to be ruled out as a mode of discovering them and they seem to have differentia which distinguish them from mere groundless but correct chance convictions. The strong reluctance to calling this knowledge on the other hand is undoubtedly due to the fact that the claimant is unable to put his finger on the evidence and prove it from any evidence or give the proof (since these propositions are by no means self-evident).

It means that if we leave out these doubtful or borderline cases as well as the self-evident propositions, knowledge is not possible without evidence although what constitutes evidence may be open to doubt. Where I would disagree with Woozley is (i) that I would not hold with him that under all conditions one cannot know p where one has no evidence for p since self evident propositions can be known although they do not fall into this category and (ii) that I would say that some instances where we hold that X has no evidence for p on the grounds that X's evidence is no evidence may well prove to be situations in which X's evidence is evidence and X has a valid claim to knowledge.

One of the points that I have tried to make so far is that there can be knowledge without evidence but that the instances are more or less limited to the knowledge claimed of self-evident propositions, whether self-evidence be interpreted to mean the self-evidence of a fact of nature, of an analytic truth or of a hypothetical connection of the form " if p, then q." We are then left with the knowledge claimed of *a priori* truths not immediately self-evident and of contingent truths. Now it would seem that a valid claim to both these forms of knowledge must be grounded on evidence and/or proof. One cannot make a valid claim to know an *a priori* truth not immediately self-evident without being able to give its proof, nor a contingent truth without being able to show the evidence and the fact this evidence entails what is claimed to be known. This brings us to Woozley's conditions (b) and (c) and to the main point of my paper.

Woozley states that to *know*, a man must not only have evidence but must (b) be right about the evidence and (c) be right about the relation of the evidence to the conclusion. It would be pertinent to ask under what conditions one would be *right* about the evidence and *right about the relation* of the evidence to the conclusion. It would appear that the only conditions under which it would be correct to say that one would be right about the evidence is where one would (i) *know* and not merely entertain, suppose or believe the propositions constituting the evidence and also (ii) *know* and not merely suspect that these propositions are relevant to the truth of the conclusion. Similarly, the only conditions under which one would be *right about the relation* of the evidence to the conclusion is where (iii) one *knows* and does not merely believe or suspect that the propositions consituting the evidence entails causally or logically the conclusion claimed to be known. The fact that merely believing in the propositions comprising the evidence and merely suspecting or even believing that the evidential propositions are related to the conclusion will not constitute valid grounds

for claiming to know the conclusion shows that what is really required for a valid claim to knowledge of a proposition p of this sort is that where evidence is required the evidence and the relation of the evidence to p should be *known* and not merely entertained or believed and that to describe this as " being *right* about the evidence etc." merely evades and obscures this fact.

Perhaps an example would clarify this point. Supposing I claim to know the proposition p namely that " that there are two books in X's library containing the same number of pages." I make this claim quite confidently although I have never seen X's library and the only information I had about it was when X, an honest and intelligent man, told me very reliably that he had exactly 275 books in his library and the biggest book (meaning thereby the book containing the largest number of pages had only 268 pages in it. Let us suppose that Y, wishing to test my claim, has access to X's library, counts the number of pages in the books and the number of books in X's library and discovers that X was right about having 275 books and that the biggest book had 268 pages. Let us also say that he makes a list of the titles of the books having the same number of pages including the numbers of these pages and now proceeds to test my claim to know p. He asks me to name at least two books having the same number of pages and to give the number of pages these two books have. I confess that I do not know and have not known the title of even a single book in his library and that I do not even know the exact number of pages that the two books I refer to have. At this, it is possible that Y who cherishes the belief that without a direct or indirect (through the testimony of others) acquaintance with two books in X's library having the same number of pages, it is not possible to know p, may say that I have no evidence since what I claim as evidence is not relevant to the truth or falsity of p. He would therefore contend that my evidence (viz. that X's library contains 275 books and the largest book has 268 pages) is no evidence at all and that therefore my claim to know p is invalid although p may be a good guess on my part.

On the other hand I maintain that the proposition that " there are 275 books in X's library " (q) and the proposition that " there are 268 pages in the biggest book in X's library " (r) together entail (in this instance, logically) the truth of p and therefore I can validly claim to know p. Of course, *prima facie*, it may appear that neither q nor r considered separately or together has any relevance to the truth of p, but I proceed as follows. Let us consider a lot of 268 out of the 275 books. Now among these 268 books either there are two books having the same number of pages or

there aren't. If there are, then p is true. But if there arent then since the pages can't exceed 268 (since the *biggest* book has 268 pages) and we avoid having two books with the same number of pages the only possible distribution of pages among them has to be that one of the books has 1 page, another 2 pages, yet another 3 pages and so on until the 268th book has 268 pages. It would be seen that any other distribution would result in at least two books having that same number of pages in which case again p is true. The only possibility of avoiding this is to have 1 to 268 pages (each having a different number of pages) for the 268 books. Now let us take one of the remaining seven books. By definition (since the biggest book contains 268 pages) this would have any number of pages from 1 to 268 but not more. But whatever this number may be (from 1 to 268) there would be a book having a corresponding number of pages in a set of 268 books according to the only distribution which avoids having two books with the same number of pages. So however we may distribute up to 268 pages for the 275 books with a maximum of 268 pages for the biggest we are bound to have at least two books having the same number of pages. So given the evidence q and r, it logically follows that p is true.

It is of course not necessary to establish my claim to know p that I should have argued exactly as above. I might have argued differently, so long as my argument was valid. I might have tried to prove in general that in any library if the number of books exceed the number of pages in its biggest book then there are at least two books in it with the same number of pages ; or I might have argued it more generally as a theorem in numbers. Or again I might even have simplified the situation by taking the example of a library with three books with only two pages in the biggest book for facility of comprehension, though this would be superfluous so long as I can validly argue that the truth of the premises constituting the evidence entail the truth of the conclusion claimed to be known.

But it is important to note that merely believing or supposing that these evidential premises (i.e. q and r in the above example) were true, can in no circumstance imply knowledge of p since the doubt that infects the premises would be carried over to the conclusion for, if I merely suppose the premises, the conclusion too would be hypothetical ; and if I merely believe the premises, the conclusion would also be a mere belief which will not constitute knowledge. It will also be seen that I may know the premises (for instance, q and r) without seeing that they are in any way relevant to the truth of p. It is therefore also necessary that I *know* and not merely suspect their relevance to the truth of p. Now to describe these two conditions as " being right about the evidence " is to miss this point, namely

that what is really required is that we *know* the premises as well as *know* their relevance to the conclusion claimed to be known.

It is also necessary before a valid claim to know p can be made that I *know* and here again not merely entertain, suspect or believe that the premises entail the conclusion and to describe this condition as " *being right about the relation* of the evidence to the conclusion " does not make this explicit.

I would however like to point out that although a valid claim to know p involves knowing the premises and their implications which show the truth of p, it is by no means necessary to a valid claim to know p that I should have previously consciously entertained these premises and seen that they were true or have gone through the proof which ensures that these premises entail p. It is sufficient that I should be *able to say* what these evidential premises are and show their relevance and relation to the conclusion if challenged, so that knowledge of these premises as also the fact that they entail what is claimed to be known need only be dispositional and not necessarily actual. But what is important is that when the criteria for knowing p are thus stated with some degree of clarity they involve a necessary reference to *knowing*, thus making the definition of knowledge in terms of evidence (in cases where evidence is relevant) circular.

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