

Knowledge Is Not Contrastive

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If knowledge is contrastive, it's not a two-place relation— Ksp . Rather, it's a three-place relation— $Kspq$. That is, it's not the case that someone simply knows a proposition. Rather, someone knows a proposition contrasted with another (disjunctive) proposition. What stands in the third place determines what the target proposition is contrasted with. The main proponent of contrastivism, Jonathan Schaffer, is clear about the virtues of a binary view of the knowledge relation: it is “intuitively plausible and theoretically elegant.” (Schaffer 2007, 386) Schaffer thinks, though, that a third place is needed to understand certain data.¹ (Schaffer 2012, 414) So unless Schaffer's arguments compel us to hold that knowledge is a ternary relation, it's best to stick with the view that it's binary. In this paper, I'll address the most well-known of these arguments, the “problem of convergent knowledge.” In fact, while responding to Kallestrup (2009)'s proposed solution to the problem, Schaffer (2009) expands the scope of the problem of convergent knowledge. In this article, I'll solve the problem in a way that escapes even the expanded version.

1 The problem of convergent knowledge

Here are some questions someone could ask someone who is looking at a bird:

Q1 Is that a goldfinch rather than a raven?

Q2 Is that a goldfinch rather than a canary?

There are knowledge-wh sentences that denote the questions above and express that the subject knows the answer to them:

¹In other earlier places, Schaffer makes the more modest claim that his view is more natural given the data. (Schaffer 2007, 392; 2005, 244)

WH1 S knows whether that is a goldfinch in the garden rather than a raven.

WH2 S knows whether that is a goldfinch in the garden rather than a canary.²

Schaffer (2007) says that if the binary view is correct, there is one knowledge-that sentence that expresses that the subject knows the answer to Q1 and Q2:

Binary 1 S knows that that is a goldfinch.

If Schaffer is correct about this, since WH1 and WH2 both express that the subject knows the answer to Q1 and Q2, on the binary view, when S knows WH1, S also knows WH2—WH1 and WH2 are convergent. Schaffer then gives arguments that WH1 and WH2 are not convergent: WH1 can be true while WH2 is false. Here they are. First, answering Q1 is easy, but answering Q2 is hard. Second, the method used to answer Q1 and the method used to answer Q2 are incommensurate. One involves simply looking; the other involves more-complex bird identification. Third, answering Q2 requires a different level of expertise than answering Q1. *Anyone* can answer a Q1, but Q2 may require an ornithologist. Fourth, intuitively 1 and 2 can have different truth values.³ So, knowledge isn't binary.⁴

2 The expanded problem

There is a problem with Schaffer's argument that Kallestrup (2009) exploits. It's puzzling why the proponent of binarity would accept that Binary1 is the right way to formulate the sentence that expresses that S knows the answer to Q1 and Q2. Jonathan Kvanvig (2013) proposes that there are many answers to Q1. For example: "It is a goldfinch," "It is not a raven," "It is a goldfinch and not a raven," and "Yes." As Kvanvig and Kallestrup propose, it would be best to answer in the way that is the most informative answer to the question without adding irrelevant information. Kallestrup proposes such a solution:⁵ the knowledge-that sentences expressing that the subject knows the answers to Q1 and Q2 are different.

²I've rephrased Schaffer's formulations of the questions and the resulting answers from his formulations in (Schaffer 2005, 241) and (Schaffer 2007, 348) which were not contrastive but were rather disjunctions.

³Schaffer claims that this is fourth point is confirmed experimentally (Schaffer 2007, 390 and fnnt 11) and (Schaffer and Knobe 2012).

⁴Of course, if one instance of knowledge is ternary, all instances of knowledge are ternary. Baumann (2008) argues against the view that if there is one instance of knowledge that is three-place, then every instance of knowledge is three-place, and Schaffer (2007, 413-4) replies persuasively.

⁵Kvanvig (2013) also proposes this solution without committing to it. Given Schaffer's reply to Kallestrup in (Schaffer 2009, 492), Schaffer takes Kallestrup to be proposing that knowledge-wh

Binary2 S knows that that is a goldfinch and not a raven.

Binary3 S knows that that is a goldfinch and not a canary.

Of course, if S knows the bird is not a raven but doesn't know it's not a canary, Binary2 is true and Binary3 is false. Since the truth values can be different, under Kallestrup's proposal, a binary view of knowledge doesn't require that WH1 and WH2 are convergent.

Schaffer (2009) responds: on Kallestrup's view, WH1 and WH2 are nearly-convergent. Knowledge-wh propositions are nearly convergent if knowing the answers to the questions they denote are a few quick closure steps away from each other. On Kallestrup's view, knowing the answer to the question WH2 denotes (Q2) is a few quick closure steps away from knowing the answer to the question WH1 denotes (Q1). Suppose I know that that is a goldfinch and not a raven in the garden. I know that if that is a goldfinch and not a raven in the garden, then that's a goldfinch in the garden. I also know that if anything is a goldfinch, it's not a canary. So I know that's not a canary in the garden. I know, then, that that's a goldfinch and not a canary in the garden. So if I know the answer to Q1, then I only need to use some other propositions I know quite easily (e.g. if something is a goldfinch, it's not a canary) and go through a few quick logical steps to know the answer to Q2. Since the answer to Q2 is a couple quick closure steps away from the answer to Q1, WH1 and WH2 are nearly convergent.

Schaffer maintains that his arguments for the non-convergence of WH1 and WH2 also support the non-*near*-convergence of WH1 and WH2. First, knowing the answer to Q1 is easy, but knowing the answer to Q2 is hard. It's harder to know that that's a goldfinch rather than a canary in the yard than it is to know that that's a goldfinch rather than a raven in the yard. On Kallestrup's proposal, though, it's quite easy to know the former if you know the latter. If you know that that's a goldfinch and not a raven in the garden, it's easy to go through the closure steps to come to know that that's a goldfinch and not a canary in the garden. Second, the method used to answer Q1 and the method used to answer Q2 are incommensurate. One involves simply looking; the other involves more-complex bird identification. But if Kallestrup's proposal is correct, if you do some simple looking to come to know the

sentences denoting contrastive questions have a disjunctive proposition in their second place (containing affirmations of some true answers, negations of salient false answers) but that corresponding knowledge-that sentences only have some true answers in their second place. Kallestrup (2009, 472) seems to deny this, though. Here's Kallestrup: "So, to sum up, if p is true, then $K(\text{whether-p-or-q})$ reduces to $K(\text{p-and-not-a})$, where p-and-not-q is the true, maximally informative, answer to the indirect question: is-p-or-q?"

answer to Q1, you can, by some quick closure steps, come to know the answer to Q2 without doing any complex bird-identification. Third, answering Q2 requires a different level of expertise than answering Q1. *Anyone* can answer a Q1, but Q2 may require an ornithologist. But if Kallestrup’s proposal is correct, once someone knows the answer to Q1, she can be a non-ornithologist and go through the quick closure steps to easily come to know the answers to Q2. Fourth, intuitively someone shouldn’t be able to know the answer to Q2 by knowing the answer to Q1 then doing some quick logical operations.

Let us call Schaffer’s expansion of the problem “the problem of nearly-convergent knowledge.” If any binary view of knowledge is to overcome the problems Schaffer has for it, the answers to Q1 and Q2—and any other questions that can be used to make Schaffer’s arguments work—can’t be quick closure steps away from each other.

3 A solution to the problem of nearly-convergent knowledge

Kallestrup’s view got its motivation by holding that if I know the answer to Q1, then I know that that’s a goldfinch rather than a raven. The difficulty is in discovering how to interpret ‘that’s a goldfinch rather than a raven’. Kallestrup interpreted this as Binary2. I propose instead to interpret it as a conditional. Before saying precisely what this conditional is, I’ll give the motivation for my view.

Following Schaffer, suppose the ‘rather than’ locution sets off other alternatives so that you can model the question—say, Q1—that contains that locution as a multiple choice question. Schaffer represents Q1 like this:

(Multiple Choice Question 1) What bird is that?

- A. That’s a goldfinch.
- B. That’s a raven.

Answering this question is easy, because to answer it, all you have to do is eliminate B. Of course, one can answer this question without treating it as a multiple choice question or without thinking about option B—there are many answers to the question. We want an informative and non-redundant answer. In order to give an informative and non-redundant answer, we should give an answer that best matches the structure of the question being asked. What’s interesting about Q1 is that it explicitly represents the options on the model of a multiple choice question, which makes the answer easier to come by—all you have to do is eliminate B, which is the

only relevant alternative. Schaffer proposes that our answer matches Q1's structure by adding a third place to the knowledge relation, where the third place determines all and only the relevant alternatives to the target proposition. I propose that our answer matches Q1's structure by encoding the structure of the question in the antecedent of a conditional in which the target proposition is the consequent. Here are some options for what the conditional can be:

Option 1 If the right way to ask the question is represented by (Multiple Choice Question 1), then that is a goldfinch.

Option 2 If the only option I have to know to be false is that that is a raven in order to know that that is a goldfinch, then that is a goldfinch.

There may be other options. In any case, the questioner asks a contrastive question, and this may or may not be the right question to ask. The answer to these contrastive questions, on my view, is a conditional whose antecedent both indicates the structure of the question and compares it to the right question to be asked and whose consequent is the target proposition. In this way, the answerer, by eliminating the alternatives determined by the question, knows the target proposition *if* the question the questioner asked is the right question to ask. This leaves open the possibility that the question is the wrong question to ask, and although Q1, for example, is set up as (Multiple Choice Question 1), that may not be the right way to represent the question.

Here's a quick objection: intuitively, a conditional isn't an answer to Q1. The answer is 'That's a goldfinch', not a conditional with 'that's a goldfinch' in the consequent. In reply, I ask: what is the motivation for thinking that a conditional isn't an answer—and the most informative answer? Perhaps the motivation is that in colloquial speech, "That's a goldfinch" is usually all that's given in reply to Q1 when it's asked. On my view, the antecedent is often elided in colloquial speech. It makes sense to elide the antecedent. The antecedent gives information that is already known in the context in which the question is asked, so to utter it would violate Grice's Maxim of Quantity: do not make your contribution more informative than is required for the current purposes of exchange. (1989, 26) As we would expect if my view is correct, this maxim is cancellable in colloquial speech. In contexts where the structure of the question isn't clear, or where someone frames the question in an unusual way, the answerer may make explicit the setup of the question in an antecedent. For example, if someone asks a question with an unusual alternative (e.g. "Is that a goldfinch or a beached whale?"), we would expect someone to answer with a conditional: "If that's the right way to set up the question, then such-and-

such is the answer,” or, “Such-and-such is the answer, *if you’ve set up the question correctly.*”

My view overcomes Schaffer’s problem of nearly-convergent knowledge, because on my view, WH1 and WH2 are not nearly convergent: the answers to Q1 and Q2 are not quick closure steps away from each other. For example, (using option 2 above) I cannot use any true closure principle to argue from ‘I know that if the only option I have to know to be false is that that is a raven in order to know that that is a goldfinch, then that is a goldfinch’ to ‘I know that if the only option I have to know to be false is that that is a canary in order to know that that is a goldfinch, then that is a goldfinch’, because I might know that the animal is not a raven but not know it’s not a canary. So, answering Q2 is harder than answering Q1 in the same way it’s harder to answer on Schaffer’s view. Further, answering Q1 and Q2 does, on my view, require incommensurate tasks, because in the case of Q1 and Q2, it may require different methods to answer (Multiple Choice Question 1) over (Multiple Choice Question 2):

(Multiple Choice Question 2) What bird is that?

- A. That’s a goldfinch.
- B. That’s a canary.

Likewise, it may require a different method to come to know the bird isn’t a canary than it takes to come to know the bird isn’t a raven. Also, answering Q1 and Q2 also requires different levels of expertise, because anyone can answer (Multiple Choice Question 1), but not everyone can answer (Multiple Choice Question 2), and not everyone who knows the bird isn’t a raven knows that the bird isn’t a canary. Last, my view supports the intuition that someone can know the answer to Q1 without knowing the answer to Q2. The view I’ve given here has been applied only to Q1 and Q2 and their corresponding wh-clauses and answers, but the same view can be easily applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to other contrastive questions and their correlates as well.

Finally, the view I’ve proposed supports the view that knowledge is binary. What’s known when questions contain contrasts is a conditional. There is no need for a third place in the knowledge relation. Note, however, that my view does not require that all answers are conditional in form. Rather, it only requires that answers are conditional in form only if the corresponding question contains a contrast. If there are questions without contrasts, e.g. Is that a goldfinch?, my view is compatible with it being that case that the proposition expressing that I know the answer to that question is just “I know that that’s a goldfinch”, which, of course, is not

a conditional. My view, then, is compatible with Moorean dogmatism. I may just plain know that I have hands rather than knowing I have hands as contrasted with, say, only non-skeptical alternatives. My view is also compatible with views opposed to Moorean dogmatism, so long as the proponents of those views can show that every question contains at least an implicit contrast.

In summary, Schaffer argues that WH1 and WH2 are non-convergent because they contain contrasts, and he uses this non-convergence to argue that knowledge is a three-place relation. Kallestrup's view puts the contrasts in the second place, thus eliminating the need for a third place, but Schaffer argues that on the Kallestrup's view, WH1 and WH2 are nearly convergent, and his arguments against the non-convergence of WH1 and WH2 also support the non-near-convergence of WH1 and WH2. I've proposed a view that also puts the contrasts in the second place, but on my view, WH1 and WH2 are not even nearly convergent. The view I've proposed preserves the informativeness and relevance of answers to the question being asked, and it preserves binarity. So, Schaffer's problem of nearly-convergent knowledge doesn't succeed in showing that knowledge is contrastive. Further, since, as Schaffer says, the binary view of knowledge is "intuitively plausible and theoretically elegant" (2007, 386), without further arguments, we should stick to the view that knowledge is binary.

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