

THEORIA, 2010, 76, 309–318
doi:10.1111/j.1755-2567.2010.01083.x

Knowledge, Ignorance and True Belief

by

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Abstract: Suppose that knowledge and ignorance are complements in the sense of being mutually exclusive: for person S and fact p, either S knows that p or is ignorant that p. Understood in this way, ignorance amounts to a lack or absence of knowledge: S is ignorant that p if and only if it is not the case that S knows that p. Let us call the thesis that knowledge and ignorance are opposites the “Complement Thesis”. In this article, I discuss its deployment in an ingenious new argument advanced by Alvin Goldman and Erik Olsson (2009) which, if sound, establishes that there is a kind of knowledge that amounts to nothing more than true belief. I rebut their argument and in doing so delineate some important epistemological lessons brought to light by the contrast between ignorance and knowledge.

Keywords: knowledge, ignorance, true belief, Goldman, Olsson.

1. Introduction

SUPPOSE WE AGREE with Alvin Goldman and Erik Olsson (2009) that knowledge and ignorance are complements in the sense of being mutually exclusive and exhaustive: for person S and fact p, either S knows that p or is ignorant that p.¹ Understood in this way, ignorance amounts to a lack or absence of knowledge: S is ignorant that p if and only if it is not the case that S knows that p. Let us call the thesis that knowledge and ignorance are complements the “Complement Thesis”.

My aim in this article is not to dispute this thesis. Rather, I aim to discuss its deployment in an ingenious new argument advanced by Goldman and Olsson (hereafter “G & O”) which, if sound, establishes that there is a sense of “knowledge” according to which knowledge amounts to nothing more than true belief.

In so arguing, G & O defend a version of what Le Morvan (2002, 2005) has called the “Sufficiency Thesis”. This thesis holds that mere true belief suffices for knowledge. We may distinguish a weak and a strong version of this thesis. The Strong Sufficiency Thesis holds that there is only one sense of “knowledge”, and on it, knowledge is merely true belief.² The Weak Sufficiency Thesis holds that, while

1 By “knowledge” here and hereafter I mean propositional or factive knowledge and not objectual or competence knowledge.

2 This view has been defended by Sartwell (1991, 1992), Levi (1980), Lenzen (1980), von Kutschera (1982) and Beckermann (2001). For critical discussion, especially of Sartwell’s defence, see Le Morvan (2002).

1 there is a strong sense of “knowledge” according to which knowledge amounts to
2 more than true belief, there is also a weak sense of “knowledge” according to which
3 knowledge is merely true belief.³ G & O explicitly defend only the Weak Suffi-
4 ciency Thesis. If we assume as do G & O that a kind of knowledge correlates with
5 each sense of “knowledge”, the Strong Sufficiency Thesis entails that there is only
6 one kind of knowledge and it is merely true belief, whereas the Weak Sufficiency
7 Thesis entails that while there is a kind of knowledge that amounts to more than
8 true belief, there is also a kind of knowledge that amounts to mere true belief.⁴

9 What is particularly interesting and ingenious about G & O’s case for the Weak
10 Sufficiency Thesis is that, for the first time in the literature, their central argument
11 purportedly shows that this thesis follows from the Complement Thesis. If true, this
12 surprising finding would have some important implications for epistemology. Let
13 me mention two. First, despite the recent surge in interest in the topic of why
14 knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief, at least on one putative sense or
15 for one putative kind, knowledge would not be more valuable than mere true belief.⁵
16 Second, a widely held tenet in contemporary epistemology – to wit, that mere true
17 belief does not suffice for knowledge – would turn out to be false, at least again for
18 one putative sense of “knowledge” or kind of knowledge. Let us call the latter tenet
19 the “Insufficiency Thesis”.

20 In this context, my plan in this article is to defend the Insufficiency Thesis by
21 rebutting the challenge posed to it by G & O’s case. In the next section, I explain
22 their case. In section 3, I argue that it fails, offer a diagnosis of where they go astray
23 in section 4, and conclude in section 5 by delineating some important epistemo-
24 logical lessons brought to light by our discussion.

26 2. G & O’s Case

27
28 I shall grant the Complement Thesis for the sake of argument. It may be encapsu-
29 lated as the following principle:

$$30 \quad (\text{COMPL}) \sim (\text{KSp}) = \text{IGNSp}$$

31
32
33 Here “KSp” means that S knows that p and “IGNSp” means that S is ignorant that
34 p. G & O note correctly that (COMPL) applies only where p is true, or factive
35 (p. 20). How then do they derive the Weak Sufficiency Thesis?

36
37 3 Goldman (1999, 2002a, 2002b) discusses and defends this view. For critical discussion, see Le Morvan
38 (2005). Note that Goldman (1999, 2002a, 2002b) and G & O do not dispute that there is a stronger sense
39 of “knowledge” or (kind of knowledge) according to which true belief does not suffice for knowledge.

40 4 G & O themselves speak interchangeably of senses of “knowledge” and kinds of knowledge, and I shall
41 not challenge their doing so.

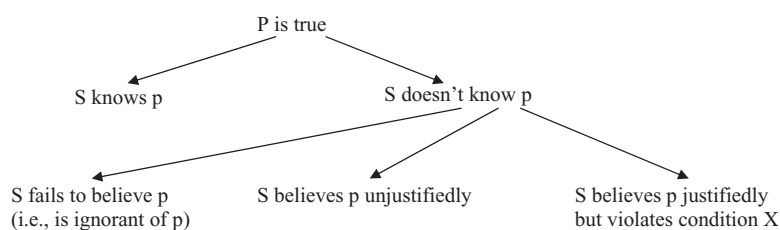
42 5 See the articles in Pritchard, Millar and Haddock (2009) as examples of this surge in interest.

1 They do so by calling into question whether (COMPL) could be true if knowl-
2 edge consisted in something more than true belief.⁶ Consider a widely discussed
3 account in contemporary epistemology according to which knowledge is justified
4 true belief plus an anti-Gettier condition X. Given p's truth, S's failure to know that
5 p would not imply S's being ignorant that p, for instead of being ignorant that p, S
6 "might believe p unjustifiedly, or might believe it justifiedly but without fulfilling
7 condition X" (p. 20). Therefore, when p is true, "failure to know p in a strong sense
8 of knowing (e.g., JTB + X) would not imply ignorance" (ibid.). So G & O conclude
9 the "correctness of (COMPL) implies that, at least in one sense, knowing is nothing
10 more than having true belief" (ibid.).

11 But could there not be three ways to be ignorant of p, namely: by not believing
12 that p, by believing that p unjustifiedly, or by believing that p justifiedly while
13 violating condition X? If so, (COMPL) would not imply the Weak Sufficiency
14 Thesis. G & O reply that this challenge turns on a claim about the meaning of
15 "ignorance" that "is plainly wrong" (p. 21). As they put it:

16
17 It is highly inaccurate, inappropriate and/or misleading to characterize somebody who unjustifiedly
18 believes (the fact that) p as being *ignorant* of p. Similarly, it is highly inaccurate, inappropriate and/or
19 misleading to characterize somebody who justifiedly believes p but fails to satisfy condition X as
20 being ignorant of p. (ibid.)

21
22 They offer a diagram they contend exhaustively captures the set of possibilities
23 if knowledge = JTB + X:
24



26 G & O explain the diagram as follows:
27

28 The complement of knowing is not knowing, but not knowing p (where p is true) can occur in any of
29 three different ways: (1) by being ignorant of p (not believing it), (2) by believing p unjustifiedly, or (3)
30 by believing p justifiedly but violating condition X. Under this concept of knowledge, no inference is
31 licensed from not knowing p to being ignorant of p. We contend, however, that there is a sense of
32

33
34
35 6 G & O also mention an example from Hawthorne (2002), and discussed in Goldman (2002b), which
36 they claim shows that there is a sense of "knowledge" that amounts to nothing more than information
37 possession which they equate with true belief. Their basic idea is that so long as someone gives a correct
38 answer to a question, one will count them as knowing in a weak sense of "knowledge". For critical
discussion of their use of this example, see Le Morvan (2005).

1 'knowing' in which this inference is licensed. People commonly make this inference. The only concept
2 of knowledge compatible with this inference is the one in which knowledge = true belief. (ibid.)
3

4 G & O thus conclude that the thesis that knowing p (in one sense of "knowing") is
5 simply believing p (where p is true) best explains the exhaustiveness of the
6 dichotomy between knowledge and ignorance. "It does not," they aver, "consist in
7 anything beyond true belief" (ibid.).

8 We may summarize their central argument as follows:
9

10 *The (COMPL) Argument for the Weak Sufficiency Thesis*

- 11 1. Suppose that (COMPL) is true.
- 12 2. (COMPL) licenses inferences from not knowing that p to being ignorant
13 of p.
- 14 3. This inference is licensed only if there is a kind of knowledge that is nothing
15 more than true belief (put alternatively: only if there is a sense of "knowl-
16 edge" according to which knowledge is nothing more than true belief).
- 17 4. Therefore, there is a kind of knowledge that is nothing more than true belief
18 (put alternatively: there is a sense of "knowledge" according to which
19 knowledge is nothing more than true belief).
20

21
22 **3. Why G & O's Case Fails**

23
24 Though ingenious, something is subtly though deeply wrong in their case. Before
25 I proceed to diagnose what it is, let me point out some of the implausibilities their
26 thesis entails.⁷

27 If there is indeed a weak kind of knowledge that amounts to *nothing more* than
28 true belief, its instances would include *any* true belief, no matter how unjustified, or
29 irrationally held, or unreliably formed.⁸ Now consider the following cases:

30 *Case 1.* Suppose that Sophie is on an operating table without any cognitive
31 access at all to the next room. As a result of some manipulation of her brain, she
32 believes that p where p = there is an odd total number of chairs in the next room.
33 She believes that p at t₁ through t₄. Suppose the belief is true at t₁, false at t₂, true
34 at t₃ and false at t₄. G & O's Weak Sufficiency Thesis entails that Sophie knew at t₁,
35 was ignorant at t₂, knew at t₃ and was ignorant at t₄. But is it not more plausible to
36
37

38 7 It's precisely because of such implausibilities that far more epistemologists than not, as evidenced by
39 the contemporary literature, hold that no knowledge can be merely true belief.

40 8 Note that G & O never make, let alone argue for, the claim that *some* mere true belief counts as weak
41 knowledge whereas *some* mere true belief does not. There is good reason for them not to make such a
42 claim, for it is far from clear what criteria there would be for drawing this distinction.

1 hold that she was *ignorant* at t_1 through t_4 with regard to p even if her belief that p
2 just happened to be true by sheer accident or luck at t_1 and t_3 ?

3 *Case 2.* Sam believes that p where $p =$ he won the lottery today. He believes it
4 only because he bought a ticket and he read his horoscope which told him it will be
5 the luckiest day of his life. He has not been informed in any way that he actually
6 won the lottery. His belief happens to be true. Though he believes that p and p is
7 true, is he still not ignorant of the fact that p and does not know that p ?

8 *Case 3.* Sarah's house was burgled. She believes that p where $p =$ her house was
9 burgled by a Canadian. Sarah believes that p only on the basis of a deep-seated
10 anti-Canadian prejudice, and not because she has any evidence that it really was a
11 Canadian who was the burglar. Her belief turns out to be true. Though she believes
12 that p and p is true, is she not ignorant of the fact that p and does not know that p ?

13 In the three cases above, we have, *pace* G & O, situations where (i) p is true, (ii)
14 S believes that p , and yet (iii) S is ignorant that p . Why is S still ignorant that p
15 despite S's true belief that p ? *Because S's true belief that p is merely accidentally*
16 *true or true as a result of mere luck.*⁹ What this strongly suggests is that, even if we
17 follow G & O in holding that ignorance and knowledge are complements in the
18 sense of being mutually exclusive and exhaustive, *ignorance and mere true belief*
19 *are not complements since not mutually exclusive and exhaustive.* So, contrary to
20 what G & O contend, it is not the case that (COMPL) licenses inferences from not
21 knowing that p to being ignorant of p only if there is a kind of knowledge (or one
22 sense of "knowledge") that is nothing more than true belief. The third premise of
23 their argument is false, and their argument unsound.

24 Suppose that G & O were to respond by rejecting the intuition underlying the
25 three cases above, and insisted that despite the accidental or lucky nature of the true
26 beliefs in question, the believer in each case knows (in their putative weak sense)
27 and is not ignorant that p . While I cannot of course force them to accept this
28 intuition, let us keep in mind the dialectical situation. G & O are not arguing for
29 their thesis in order to persuade themselves, for there would be little point in doing
30 that. Rather, they are trying to persuade a broader philosophical audience of the
31 cogency of the Weak Sufficiency Thesis, a thesis that flies in the face of the widely
32 held (since at least the time of Plato) Insufficiency Thesis. In raising these cases, I
33 am pointing out that accepting their thesis involves accepting its consequences, one
34 of which is that *any* true belief – no matter how unjustified, or irrationally held, or
35 unreliably formed – counts as an instance of a kind of knowledge. While G & O
36
37

38 ⁹ I thank an anonymous referee of this journal for suggesting this way of putting matters. In an earlier
39 version, I wrote that S did not know that p because S has no cognitive access to the state of affairs in virtue
40 of which S's belief that p is true. While I still think this is correct, I acknowledge that appealing to cognitive
41 access would be to appeal to a notion itself in need of explication, and doing so would take us too far afield
42 from the central argumentation of this article.

1 may indeed be prepared to accept this consequence, the rest of us should be
2 apprised of it before accepting their thesis.

3 Consider in this connection an analogy. Suppose that G & O were confronted by
4 someone even more radical than they who contended that there is a *very weak* kind
5 of knowledge (or a *very weak* sense of “knowledge”) that requires only belief and
6 not truth (i.e., knowledge is simply belief). By my lights, there would be nothing
7 wrong with G & O pointing out counter-intuitive consequences of what we might
8 call the “Very Weak Sufficiency Thesis” by adducing examples that expose its
9 implausibility. While its proponent may not be convinced and may simply bite the
10 bullet (such, alas, is the human philosophical condition), it does not follow that G
11 & O should not raise these counter-examples to alert others of the implausibility
12 they may find in the thesis. In sum, even if the proponents of a thesis may bite the
13 bullet when presented with contrary intuitions, it does not follow that defenders of
14 a counter-thesis should not adduce these intuitions so that members of a broader
15 philosophical audience can make their own more informed judgment on the matter.
16 This is precisely what I have sought to do in raising these cases with regard to G &
17 O’s Weak Sufficiency Thesis.¹⁰

18 Interestingly, while G & O correctly note that (COMPL) licenses the inference
19 from not knowing to ignorance, they fail to address the implications of another
20 inference it licenses, namely, *from knowing to non-ignorance*. The latter inference
21 provides us with a way of generating a counter-argument to the Weak Sufficiency
22 Thesis (in which argument we suppose that p is true):
23

24 *The (COMPL) Argument Against the Weak Sufficiency Thesis*

- 25
- 26 1. It is not the case that (COMPL) licenses inferences from believing that p to
27 not being ignorant that p.
 - 28 2. The Weak Sufficiency Thesis licenses inferences from believing that p to not
29 being ignorant that p.
 - 30 3. Therefore, the Weak Sufficiency Thesis is false.
31

32 This argument is logically valid.¹¹ I have in effect argued above for the first
33 premise by arguing that true belief and ignorance are *not* complements. (If they are
34

35 10 Worth noting moreover is that G & O themselves are not averse to appealing to widely held intuitions,
36 and they do so in supposing without argument that truth and belief are required for knowledge of any kind.

37 11 The validity of the argument may be more readily seen if we put the argument a little more formally
38 as follows where “BSp” means S believes that p, “IGNSp” means that S is ignorant that p, and “WST”
39 stands for the Weak Sufficiency Thesis:

- 40 1. $\neg[(\text{COMPL}) \rightarrow (\text{BSp} \rightarrow \neg\text{IGNSp})]$
- 41 2. $\text{WST} \rightarrow (\text{BSp} \rightarrow \neg\text{IGNSp})$
- 42 3. $\neg[\neg(\text{COMPL}) \vee (\text{BSp} \rightarrow \neg\text{IGNSp})]$ from 1, logical equivalence
- 43 4. $(\text{COMPL}) \& \neg(\text{BSp} \rightarrow \neg\text{IGNSp})$ from 3, logical equivalence
- 44 5. $\neg(\text{BSp} \rightarrow \neg\text{IGNSp})$ from 4, simplification
- 45 6. $\neg\text{WST}$ from 4 and 2, *modus tollens*

1 not complements, the first premise is true.) The second premise is an implication of
2 the Weak Sufficiency Thesis. Therefore, if I am right that true belief and ignorance
3 are not complements, the Weak Sufficiency Thesis is false.

4. Diagnosis

7 Where have G & O gone wrong? Let us look again at a crucial claim they make:

9 It is highly inaccurate, inappropriate and/or misleading to characterize somebody who unjustifiedly
10 believes (the fact that) p as being *ignorant* of p. Similarly, it is highly inaccurate, inappropriate and/or
11 misleading to characterize somebody who justifiedly believes p but fails to satisfy condition X as
12 being ignorant of p. (p. 21)

14 Their case for the Weak Sufficiency Thesis turns on this claim. And it does have a
15 certain air of plausibility, does it not? I shall argue that this seeming plausibility
16 stems from a subtle conflation. Let me explain.

17 Before we proceed any further, let us distinguish two key senses of “fact”: the
18 truth sense and the truth-maker sense.¹² In the truth sense, a fact is simply a true
19 proposition (e.g., the proposition that snow is white), whereas in the truth-maker
20 sense, a fact is that in virtue of which a true proposition is true, namely, the world’s
21 being as it is expressed to be in the proposition in question (e.g., snow’s being
22 white).¹³

23 G & O correctly take “aware” and “cognizant” to be (rough) synonyms of
24 “know”.¹⁴ Given our distinction between facts as true propositions and as truth-
25 makers, we can distinguish between being aware or cognizant of a true proposition
26 that p and being aware or cognizant of the truth-maker in virtue of which p is true.
27 And given this distinction, it does not follow that being aware of the fact (= true
28 proposition) that p entails being aware of the fact (= truth-maker) that p. In light of
29 this, let us suppose that G & O are right that in order to believe that p one must in
30 some sense or other be aware or cognizant of the proposition that p, for one could
31 not have a belief without some awareness or cognizance of its content.¹⁵ Even if we
32 grant this supposition, however, believing the fact (= true proposition) that p, which
33 *ex hypothesi* requires awareness of the (true) proposition that p, does not entail
34 awareness of p’s truth-maker obtaining, for a proposition, even a true one, is not its
35

37 _____
38 12 In light of this distinction, let me add that when I used the term “fact” in the previous section, it was
39 in the truth-maker sense.

40 13 I am assuming here a rather standard commonsensical correspondence account of truth, one that I
41 think G & O would themselves be loath to reject.

42 14 They also take “possesses the information that p” to be (roughly) synonymous with “knows that p” on
43 a weak sense of “knowledge”. See Le Morvan (2005) for critical discussion of this claim.

15 If the belief is dispositional so too may be this awareness.

1 own truth-maker, and it is possible to have beliefs that happen to be true as a result
2 of sheer accident or luck as illustrated by my earlier examples.

3 In case the relevance of this distinction is still not sufficiently clear, let me put the
4 point in different but related terms. Suppose that *p* is true. It is possible to be
5 ignorant of the proposition that *p* and also possible to be ignorant of *p*'s truth-maker
6 obtaining (that is, the world really being as it is represented by *p* to be). If one is
7 ignorant of the proposition that *p*, then one cannot have the belief that *p* in the first
8 place, for, as G & O maintain, cognizance of the proposition that *p* is a precondition
9 of having the belief that *p*. (This is presumably because one can have the belief that
10 *p* only if one is cognizant (or has been cognizant) of that belief's content which is
11 constituted by the proposition in question.)¹⁶ Insofar as the belief that *p* is required
12 for knowledge that *p*, one cannot have the knowledge that *p* if one is ignorant in this
13 sense of the proposition that *p*. But even if one meets this necessary condition for
14 having the belief that *p* in the first place (namely, by not being ignorant of the
15 proposition in question), it is still possible to be ignorant that *p*'s truth-maker
16 obtains. Just because one believes the proposition that *p*, and therefore is not
17 ignorant of that proposition, *it does not follow that one is not ignorant that p's*
18 *truth-maker obtains*. For instance, let *p* be the proposition that there is a Black Hole
19 at the centre of the Milky Way Galaxy, and suppose that *p* is true. In order for me
20 to believe that *p*, I must not be ignorant of the proposition that *p*, but it does not
21 follow from this that I am not ignorant of a Black Hole's really being at the centre
22 of the Milky Way Galaxy. Non-ignorance of a proposition, even if it happens to be
23 true, does not entail non-ignorance of its truth-maker obtaining.

24 If, however, one conflates knowledge or awareness or cognizance of facts as
25 (true) propositions with knowledge or awareness or cognizance of facts as truth-
26 makers, then it is likely that one will, as do G & O, find it "highly inaccurate,
27 inappropriate and/or misleading to characterize somebody who unjustifiedly
28 believes (the fact that) *p* as being *ignorant* of *p*" and find it "highly inaccurate,
29 inappropriate and/or misleading to characterize somebody who justifiedly believes
30 *p* but fails to satisfy condition *X* as being ignorant of *p*." Of course, somebody who
31 unjustifiedly believes (the fact that = true proposition) *p*, or who justifiedly believes
32 *p* but fails to satisfy condition *X*, is not ignorant of *p*, for one could not presumably
33 have the belief that *p* in the first place while being ignorant that *p* in the sense of
34 having no knowledge or awareness or cognizance of the (true) proposition *p*. But it
35 does not follow from this – unless one conflates cognizance of true propositions
36
37

38 16 To amplify: we are distinguishing between the content of beliefs (namely, how beliefs represent the
39 world) and their truth-makers (namely, the world being as the belief represents it to be). I strongly doubt
40 that G & O would be willing to deny this distinction, for without it one has difficulty accounting for the
41 content of false beliefs, and such beliefs are precisely ones whose falsity is a function of the world not
42 being as it is represented to be by the belief's content.

1 with cognizance of truth-makers – that somebody who unjustifiedly believes (the
2 fact that = true proposition) p, or who justifiedly believes p but fails to satisfy
3 condition X, is not ignorant of the fact that p, where the fact that p is not the true
4 proposition that p *but rather the truth-maker in virtue of which it is true.*

5 In essence, by failing to distinguish between knowledge or awareness or cogni-
6 zance of facts in the sense of true propositions and knowledge or awareness or
7 cognizance of facts in the sense of truth-makers, G & O fail to distinguish between
8 ignorance of facts as true propositions and ignorance of facts as truth-makers. Even
9 if they are right that one cannot have the true belief that p while being ignorant of
10 the proposition that p, they fail to recognize that having the true belief that p does
11 not preclude ignorance that p's truth-maker obtains. Insofar as a crucial underpin-
12 ning of their case for the Weak Sufficiency Thesis rests on a conflation between
13 ignorance of facts as true propositions with ignorance of facts as truth-makers, our
14 exposure of their conflation reveals a central flaw in their argumentation.

16 5. Some Concluding Remarks

17
18 In light of the considerations adduced above, I conclude that G & O fail to show that
19 the Weak Sufficiency Thesis follows from the complementariness of knowledge and
20 ignorance. Despite the failure of their case, we may derive from it the following
21 important epistemological lessons:

- 22 (1) Knowledge of facts as true propositions should be distinguished from
23 knowledge of facts as truth-makers.
- 24 (2) Ignorance of facts as true propositions should be distinguished from igno-
25 rance of facts as truth-makers.
- 26 (3) Even if knowledge and ignorance are complements, there is good reason to
27 think that true belief and ignorance are not.
- 28 (4) Insofar as true belief and ignorance are not complements, there is good
29 reason to think that the Weak Sufficiency Thesis is false.
- 30 (5) Insofar as the Weak Sufficiency Thesis is false, knowledge must amount to
31 something other than mere true belief as claimed by the Insufficiency Thesis.
32

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