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THE TYRANNY OF KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract: In his “Logic, Language, and Knowledge” Chateaubriand denounces the tyranny of belief (Chapter 22), but takes some positions on knowledge and justification (Chapter 24) which seem to be too exacting. The fact that Chateaubriand derives constraints on the notion of justification by a close parallel to the notion of proof makes it unnecessarily loaded with the individual, rather than with the collective perspective. His position seems to leave little room for common knowledge, collective knowledge and usual common-sense knowledge, and absolutely no room for explaining how people take correct decisions based on apparently faulty notions of knowledge and justification.

Keywords: Knowledge. Justification. Common knowledge. Collective knowledge. Common-sense. Making decisions.

A TIRANIA DO CONHECIMENTO

Resumo: Em “Logic, Language, and Knowledge” Chateaubriand denuncia a tirania da crença (Capítulo 22), mas toma posições sobre conhecimento e justificação (Capítulo 24) que parecem demasiado exigentes. O fato de Chateaubriand derivar condições sobre a noção de justificação a partir de uma estreita analogia com a noção de prova torna a noção de justificação desnecessariamente carregada com a perspectiva individual, em detrimento da perspectiva coletiva. Sua posição parece deixar pouco espaço para noções como conhecimento comum, conhecimento coletivo e senso comum, e absolutamente nenhum espaço para explicar como as pessoas tomam decisões corretas com base em noções aparentemente errôneas de conhecimento e de justificação.

Palavras chave: Conhecimento. Justificação. Conhecimento comum. Conhecimento coletivo. Senso comum. Tomada de decisões.

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In his *Logical Forms Part II: Logic, Language, and Knowledge*, Chateaubriand strives to convince his reader – and does this with considerable success – that logic is a science, or at least is much more a science than just a formal model-theoretic normative account of reasoning. Consequently, the notion of a proof has to be backed up by an epistemological standpoint, and thus the concept of proof, and a fortiori of logic as a whole, has to be connected in an essential way to knowledge, justification and truth. In a sense, this encompasses the triad which subtitles the book: Logic, Language, and Knowledge, and the question of “The Tyranny of Belief” (Chapter 22) and “Knowledge and Justification” (Chapter 24) turns out to be central for Chateaubriand’s position. He starts by recognizing that knowledge has some kind of *primaeva*, embryonic component, cognate to a Quinean notion of “theoretical existence” (p. 348):

I want to say something similar about knowledge and belief. Our anchor in this case is gut belief; animal faith [...] This gut belief carries its own justification with it, and, since it is mostly true, it is knowledge of sorts; gut knowledge. It is the starting point of all knowledge. Again we generalize in all directions. There is that river where we drank yesterday, and we remember where it is. And so we know that it is there and that we drank from it.

How does knowledge evolve from such embryonic stage and crack the eggshell? Basically, Chateaubriand replies that this occurs because other minds enter the scenario: we start arguing to convince others of our knowledge (and also of our belief). Reasoning and argumentation also evolve because of our desire, or our need, to protect our beliefs against outer attacks, and to attack competitor beliefs. In this way, so Chateaubriand claims, logic, science, philosophy, and (some components of) religion emerge. However, we still keep our gut beliefs and gut knowledge, as this is part of those survival mechanisms we came equipped with in our evolutionary toolkit.

It is an axiom of current epistemology, recalls Chateaubriand, to accept knowledge as justified true belief, and apart some proviso to take care of the well-known Gettier counter-examples, he considers that few people see any reason to seriously abandon this—but I think Chateaubriand overlooks here a proposal by Fred Dretske in [3] where the traditional justified “true belief” account of knowledge is replaced with an “information-theoretic” account; so, in principle, there are other ways to circumvent belief in order to reach knowledge¹. However, beliefs are not opinion, and if we are not careful enough, certain kinds of belief will tyrannize us and act coercively even acting against the search for truth, while knowledge is ready to adapt and face the alterity, the otherness. So knowledge should be freed from the morass of belief² (p. 355):

I conclude that knowledge is not justified true *belief*. Knowledge is truth justified beyond a reasonable doubt. If there is enough doubt, or if there is not truth, then we may have theoretical belief but not knowledge.

So Chateaubriand seems satisfied for having given the basis for conceptualizing knowledge as justified truth: now, free from the coercion of belief, the problem is how such a justification can be entertained. Faithful to his own view on logic, he considers that the ontological constraint on knowledge must be wide enough, so that

¹ It is to be noted, however, that Dretske’s account is criticized in [6].

² Chateaubriand seems to be echoing here a distinction between strong belief and weak belief. To weakly believe something is to be rationally (or doxastically) committed to its being highly probable, while to strongly believe something is to be vitally committed to it. So we are prepared to give up a weak or a theoretical belief, but not a strong one. So someone may be prepared to revise his/her belief that the dollar will fall against the euro tomorrow, but not his/her belief in life after death—at least not so easily.

not only the truth of the proposition (candidate to be known) should be relevant to knowledge, but also the correctness of the justification should be taken into account (p. 355):

The justification should not just seem to be a good justification; it must *be* a good justification. It is the difference, once again, between psychology and epistemology.

And in order to hold the status of an epistemological (and not psychological) notion, justification must satisfy four main constraints which essentially makes it akin to a mathematical proof: good justifications must be, so he proposes, syntactically structured, convincing, socially acceptable (in the sense of conforming with the accepted “rules of the game”), and ontologically relevant.

Is this not too much? I think it is: ontological relevance, in the explicit sense Chateaubriand requires, may be excessively demanding when combined with syntactical structure, convincingness and social acceptability. An ontological constraint for knowledge, for instance, is that what is known must be true, but what is required, in general, is much more than this: the ontological relevance must guarantee the movement from premises to conclusions, and if the ontological constraint were not satisfied, no knowledge would be achieved. This is barely attainable even in mathematical practice, where proofs are done diagrammatically or analogically – examples are the paradigmatic appeals to the fact that “the diagram commutes” in category theory, to the “exact sequence” (of sheaves, or cohomology groups), in algebraic geometry, and so on.

Even considering Frege’s influence on Chateaubriand, Fregean anti-psychologism (which was certainly pivotal when logic struggled to be divorced from psychology) should perhaps not be taken so dramatically (p. 356):

The notion of justification, however, at least in cases not involving argument, continues to be treated as a psychological notion for no good reason that I can see.

The notion of justification may, indeed, take a subtly different aspect in multi-agent knowledge and group interaction. In the concept of *common knowledge*, for instance, introduced by David Lewis in [5] as an essential ingredient for defining the notion of convention among the members of a group, the aspect of justification plays a secondary role. Thus, in a reasoning group interested in establishing common knowledge or distributed knowledge, the notion of justification does not fall within the schema Chateaubriand imagines for his “lonely knower” and is much more inclined over psychological or sociological notions as he would perhaps be ready to accept.

To clarify this point, I draw attention to a four-pages seminal paper by Robert J. Aumann (cf. [1]), where he proves the startling result that, if two rational people have the same prior probability distribution (in a rigorously definable Bayesian sense), they cannot agree to disagree so they reach a justification for their common knowledge in a purely probabilistic way³.

Outside the restricted area of producing proofs (which, as I hope to have argued convincingly, not even the practitioner mathematician performs all the time), the notion of knowledge is tightly connected to decision making: we say “I know how to buy a good book”, “she knows the way home”, “they know their trade” and so on. Especially to what concerns decision making and social choice theory, economists (mainly, but not only) have recognized the interesting role of *collective knowledge*, which can surpass even qualified individual knowledge. A crowd enjoying certain conditions

³ Robert J. Aumann was awarded, with Thomas Schelling, the 2005 Nobel Prize in Economics for his work on conflict and cooperation through game-theoretical analysis.

as diversity of opinion, decentralization, and independence may be able to make certain types of decisions and predictions better than expert individuals (this thesis is exposed in a semi-scientific way in [8]). Would this capacity be proscribed and be prohibited to carry the label “knowledge”? Not really – an ability of this sort is certainly among the most precious ones, or according to Chateaubriand (p. 348), it can be considered as

[...] part of those mechanisms of survival that keep us here as a species, and as individuals, and we share them with our fellow species and fellow individuals.

In [9] J. van Benthem defends a new form of psychologism connected to logic, correctly (in my opinion) pointing out that logical systems usually do not take into account the role of memory as an information source, and learning as a cognitive phenomenon. Although van Benthem is involved in that paper with some advertising for games and logical dynamics, in [4] van Benthem with the model-theorist W. Hodges and the psychiatrist H. Hodges edits a special issue showing examples on current interaction between logic and psychology, which certainly affects our idea of justification, for knowledge has a teleological component: indeed, knowledge has purpose⁴, and it is perhaps in this way that knowledge is used by everyone (except perhaps by the philosophers) to make correct predictions and to take correct decisions—otherwise, how could we explain that people take vital decisions, so quickly and so well, based on apparently “faulty logic”?

⁴ Hardly a new idea, as Francis Bacon already puts in [2]: (9) “The other part of invention, which I term suggestion, doth assign and direct us to certain marks, or places, which may excite our mind to return and produce such knowledge as it hath formerly collected, to the end we may make use thereof. [...] For a faculty of wise interrogating is half a knowledge.”

In his very nice book [7] on the history of ideas, Paolo Rossi argues that the mnemonic arts (connected with the idea of a universal language) commonly associated with occultism, mysticism and magical thinking, and presumed to have been abandoned with the development of formal logic, cannot be so easily dismissed as a fundamental component of modern thought. He explicitly refers (p. 201 ff.) to Pierre de La Ramée (or Petrus Ramus), a French humanist and philosopher of the Sixteenth century (1515-72), for whom memory constitutes the tool that introduces order in knowledge and in speech.

I would expect that logic, especially logic conceived as a science, could set knowledge free from the confinement that we may unnecessarily be imposing on it. In particular, logic should explain, rather than dismiss, how people think and acquire common knowledge, collective knowledge and even common-sense knowledge. The challenge for logic is to provide such an explanation, instead of declaring insane or “philosophically unsound” the practices that do not conform to the dogmas of knowledge, particularly to what concerns any excessive demand for justification. It seems to me that this character of rigidity and immutability attribute to knowledge lies in the heart of the problems posed by paradoxes of knowledge such as the well-known “surprise examination paradox” and F. Fitch’s “knowability paradox”. Are the concepts of logic and knowledge, as Chateaubriand conceives them, capable of taking the challenge?

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