

# Toward Saving Nozick from Kripke

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## 1. Historical Prelude

Tracking theories<sup>1</sup> of knowledge, though quite popular have been under attack from their inception. Specifically, we have in mind the attacks of Saul Kripke.<sup>2</sup> We don't think these attacks on tracking theories work. In this paper, we take a step towards rescuing Nozick's version of the tracking theories of knowledge from the attacks of Kripke.

## 2. The Kripke Examples<sup>3</sup>

### *The Red Barn*

Peg is looking at a red barn. Red barns cannot be faked though barns of other color can be faked. Peg has perfect eyesight and is observing the barn under standard lighted viewing conditions. According to Nozick's conditions, Peg knows there is a *red barn*, but Kripke claims that it is a consequence of Nozick's theory that Peg does not know there is a *barn*. Peg does not know there is a barn because she fails' Nozick's tracking condition that if there were not a barn, Peg would not believe there were. She would believe of a white fake barn that it was a barn.

Nozick is very clear that his tracking conditions must be relativized to methods. For example, otherwise only God could satisfy the condition that if  $p$  were true, one would believe it. When we specify the method of belief formation that yields Peg's knowledge that there is a red barn, we see that the same method yields her knowledge that there is a *barn*.

Let's look at a related example.<sup>4</sup> Suppose Pam never confuses Volkswagen Beetles with Saabs. However, Pam thinks Saabs are the luxury version of the Volkswagen and that Beetles are the economy version. When Pam sees a Beetle under ideal viewing conditions she knows that it is a Volkswagen Beetle. Her method of knowing is to look at the shape and size of the Volkswagen Beetle. The visual experience of the shape and size of the Beetle carries the information both that the car is a Beetle and that it is a Volkswagen. Not only does she know that it is a Beetle, but she also knows that it is a Volkswagen. Pam satisfies Nozick's tracking condition that if it were not a Beetle and she used the VW-Beetle method, she would not believe that it was a Beetle. It is also true that if it were not a Volkswagen and she used the VW-Beetle method, she would not believe it was a Volkswagen.<sup>5</sup> So contrary to Kripke, we maintain that this is a case where Pam knows both that it is a Beetle and that it is a Volkswagen because she is using the same reliable method to detect both.

Returning to the red barn example, since Peg is using the reddish barnish look to form the belief that there is a red barn, she satisfies Nozick's tracking condition that if there were not a red barn, she would not believe there were. And if there were not a red barn present and peg were to believe there were a barn, she would not be using the same red barn look method. This leads us to believe that when Peg believes there is a red barn, she believes there is a barn in part employing the red barn method. This method insures that Peg knows of this structure that it is both red and a barn. Hence, Peg indeed does know of the red barn *that it is a barn*, contrary to Kripke's claim. Essentially, Kripke's example only appears to be problematic if one violates Nozick's strictures on method.

Someone may object that we slicing methods too thinly or without principle merely to rescue Nozick. Maybe there will be some sympathy for the notion of a VW-Beetle method of belief formation, but we suspect people will balk at the notion of a red-barn method of belief formation. Our reply is that in the wild, even the Stickleback fish has to solve the red dot detection method of rivals during mating season. If fish can solve this epistemic detection problem, yielding knowledge of their rivals, then surely we can solve it and there are real live models of this abstract method of knowing.

### *The Deceased Dictator*

The strongman dictator of a totalitarian country dies. The state-run newspaper prints that the dictator is dead ( $p$ ). Later, fearing a coup, the newspaper prints a retraction saying that there was a mistake. They show pictures of the dictator alive and well. Ken returns from a long trip out of the country. He reads the first newspaper, but then goes to sleep due to jetlag. The rest of the country read and believes the retraction. Ken, like others, would believe the retraction, if he were to read the second newspaper. So while Ken sleeps he loses his knowledge that the dictator is dead because he fails Nozick's condition that if the dictator were dead, Ken would believe it. Ken would not believe it, if he read the retraction<sup>6</sup>.

Kripke's modification of this original example by Harman is to add the proposition ( $q$ ) that "I have read an uncontradicted report of the dictator's death." Kripke maintains that on Nozick's conditions Ken knows  $p \& q$  but not  $p$  (as we've seen above, Ken fails to know  $p$ ). Supposedly, Ken knows  $p \& q$  because his belief that  $p \& q$  does satisfy the condition that if  $p \& q$ , Ken would believe  $p \& q$ . This is true because for Ken to believe that he had read an uncontradicted report of the dictator's death, he would have to have read an uncontradicted report. So Ken would have not to have read the second newspaper (keeping  $q$  true).

In reply, this example fails because Ken knows neither  $p$  nor  $p \& q$ , on Nozick's own conditions. Ken will either be savvy and not believe something merely because it appears in the state controlled newspaper or gullible, and he will believe everything that appears there. So suppose Ken is savvy. Then Ken does not know  $p \& q$ , because he fails

<sup>1</sup> We include among the tracking theorists Armstrong (1973), Dretske (1971, 1981) and Nozick (1981), but we will focus only on Nozick here.

<sup>2</sup> Why just this attack? Without doubt it has been the most influential and is widely believed to succeed in defeating the tracking theories.

<sup>3</sup> Kripke gave these examples at a session of the APA in the 1980s, but the paper was never published. It has been widely circulated and almost everyone we meet thinks the examples work, but they do not work – as we shall now begin to show for a subset of them.

<sup>4</sup> This example was based on one by Goldman and appeared in Dretske's (1975) review of Armstrong.

<sup>5</sup> It is true that if she used the "looks like a Saab" method, she might believe a non-Volkswagen to be a Volkswagen. But this is irrelevant to whether she knows it is a Volkswagen when using the VW-Beetle method.

<sup>6</sup> This example turns on Nozick's fourth condition only. So we will focus attention on that condition in presenting the example.

the fourth condition. It is not true of Ken that if  $p \& q$  then he would believe it. A savvy Ken rejects many things that he reads in the state run newspaper. So, suppose that Ken is gullible. Then he believes everything that appears in the state run newspaper. In that case Ken fails condition three, viz. that if  $p \& q$  were not true, Ken would not believe  $p \& q$ . A gullible Ken believes falsehoods that are printed in the newspaper. In that case, Ken cannot (without independent confirmation) learn anything from a state run newspaper that is highly unreliable. So on Nozick's own conditions, the dictator example is not a case where Ken knows  $p \& q$  but does not know  $p$  (as intended by Kripke).

For good measure, we will discuss one more of Kripke's purported counterexamples to tracking theories. We will not attempt to exhaustively cover them here, but we maintain that each fails. We hope to have demonstrated that we could go on and demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the rest.

#### *The Sloppy Scientist*

Steve is looking for a cure for a particular disease. Steve selects a drug D for several trials of treatment. The trials are effective in curing the disease and Steve comes to believe that drug D will cure this disease ( $p$ ). Unfortunately, Steve is a sloppy scientist. He forgets to run a control using a placebo. As it turns out, had he used the controls, the placebos would have been negative.

Kripke maintains that this is a counterexample to Nozick because it satisfies Nozick's conditions for knowing, but that Steve does not know that  $p$ . Steve does not know because Steve's procedure is irrational. Steve is ignoring standard control procedures for sound experimental design. Despite this, Steve satisfies Nozick's tracking conditions. Specifically, if  $p$  were not true Steve would not believe that  $p$ , and if  $p$  were true, Steve would believe that  $p$  (given his sloppiness).

Kripke's example is exploiting the intuition that one cannot learn something from an unreliable method or procedure: due to sloppiness, Steve's experimental procedure is unreliable. Kripke is also suggesting that Steve's procedure is somewhat irrational and that one cannot know something if one is being somewhat irrational. This latter claim concerning irrationality is reminiscent of Bonjour's attack on externalist theories, which we also reject in a longer paper. Here we will focus our comments on the suggestion that Steve does not know that  $p$  because Steve's procedure is unreliable because Steve is sloppy. We maintain that being sloppy does not preclude latching onto knowledge or a reliable method.

There are at least two kinds of sloppiness. One kind would exist if Steve were sloppy in screening patients for the disease or in the experimental set up where he administered the drug. Call this primary process sloppiness. If Steve didn't control for variables and background conditions in the administering of the drug itself, then we would agree that Steve does not know that  $p$ . But in this kind of case, the sloppiness would cause Steve to fail Nozick's conditions. There could be false positives or false negatives in the administering of drug D and collecting the results. In Kripke's example, Steve was not sloppy in this primary way.

Another kind of sloppiness is secondary process sloppiness. Here Steve fails to provide an independent check on his results. We see this as a failure of confirmation not of information. Steve is at fault for not attempting to verify his information. His primary process procedure of administering the drug and controlling for variables, is impeccable. He is sloppy in his neglect of secondary process controls. We maintain that, perhaps surprisingly, Steve does know that  $p$  because he satisfies Nozick's tracking conditions. Steve does receive the information that drug D cures the disease. What he does not do is gather sound confirmation that he has received that very information.

We suspect that dissenters will say that scientific knowledge only comes into existence after the secondary process controls are in place. Isn't that what double blind experiments are all about? But we maintain that this is what confirmation is all about. It is part and parcel of attempting to confirm a hypothesis that says that a particular theory or claim is true. In cross-examining a witness, prior to the cross-examination, a witness may be telling the truth and be perfectly reliable. The jury won't know that or suspect it until *after the cross-examination*, but this does not mean that the witness was not reliable until after the cross-examination.

### 3. Conclusion

This concludes our brief survey of what we take to be the best of the attempts to kill off the tracking theories of knowledge. We maintain that none of them succeed. We maintain that the tracking theories remain viable accounts of knowledge.

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