

**PRÉCIS OF “THE POSSIBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE”
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My book is about how-possible questions in epistemology, questions of the form “How is knowledge of kind K possible?”. I explain how such questions arise and propose a way of answering them. I suggest that epistemological how-possible questions are obstacle-dependent and that a satisfactory response to such questions must therefore be, at least in part, an obstacle-removing response. We ask how knowledge of kind K is possible when we are inclined to think that knowledge of this kind is possible but encounter apparent obstacles to its existence or acquisition. So the question is: how is knowledge of kind K possible given the factors that make it look impossible?

Sometimes the obstacle is the lack of any means of acquiring knowledge of kind K. If we think we have this kind of knowledge then we presumably think that we have means of acquiring it.¹ We might be concerned, however, that the means we usually employ to acquire it are inadequate and that no better means are available to us. The first stage of a satisfying response to an epistemological how-possible question should therefore consist in the identification of viable means of acquiring the apparently problematic knowledge.² This is Level 1 of what I call a multi-levels response to the how-possible question, the level of means. Level 2 is the obstacle-removing level, the level at which we try to show that there are no insuperable obstacles to our coming to know by the suggested means. What counts as an obstacle is largely a matter what philosophers have actually found problematic about this kind of knowledge. Suppose that the obstacle takes the form of an epistemological requirement R that supposedly cannot be met. In that case, we must either show that R can be met or that it is not a genuine requirement. I call the former an obstacle-overcoming response while the latter

¹ It might be held that self-knowledge is a kind of knowledge that we have even though there is nothing recognizable as means of acquiring it. If this is true then the obvious question to ask is: how is such a thing possible? See Cassam, forthcoming, for further discussion.

² I sometimes refer to means of knowing as *ways* of knowing. See Cassam (2007b) for further discussion of the notion of a way of knowing.

is an obstacle-dissipating response. Lastly, if the proposal is that it is possible to acquire knowledge of kind K by means M then a further question we can – but don't have to – ask is: what makes it possible to acquire K by M, that is, what are the *a priori* enabling conditions for acquiring K by M? This brings us to Level 3 of a multi-levels response, the level of enabling conditions.

A minimalist is someone who thinks that distinctively philosophical explanations of the possibility of knowledge cannot go beyond Level 2. Moderate anti-minimalism is the view that philosophical Level 3 explanations are possible but not necessary. Extreme anti-minimalists think that philosophical Level 3 explanations are both possible and necessary. Practitioners of various forms of naturalized epistemology who think that Level 3 questions are questions for empirical science rather than *a priori* philosophy are minimalists. Kant is an extreme anti-minimalist, and many of his most interesting claims are claims at Level 3. He takes it that perceiving is a means of knowing about the world around us and argues that categorial thinking and spatial perception are *a priori* enabling condition for the acquisition of perceptual knowledge. I defend watered down versions of these Kantian claims but my anti-minimalism is moderate rather than extreme.

My account of how-possible questions is heavily influenced by Kant's account of the possibility of geometrical knowledge. Kant asks how this kind of knowledge is possible because he thinks that (a) it is synthetic *a priori* and (b) neither of what might be regarded as the core sources of human knowledge – experience and conceptual analysis - can make it available to us. He wants an account of geometrical knowledge that respects both (a) and (b) so he begins by identifying construction in pure intuition as a pathway to this kind of knowledge.³ Next, he argues that the fact that what we construct in intuition are individual figures is not an insuperable obstacle to the acquisition of *a priori* geometrical knowledge by this means. Finally, he tries to show that the transcendental ideality of physical space is what makes it possible for construction in intuition to be a means of coming to know its geometry both synthetically and *a priori*. In my terms, this is a multi-levels account of the possibility

³ What we construct are concepts. To construct a concept like *triangle* is to represent a triangle either by imagination alone or on paper. The former is construction in pure intuition. The latter is construction in empirical intuition.

of geometrical knowledge, and it is the structure of the account rather than its details that is of special interest.

Kant's multi-levels framework can be applied to many other epistemological how-possible questions. For example, some sceptics ask how knowledge of the external world is possible because they think that human beings get their knowledge of the world somehow from sense-perception and that there are certain apparently undeniable facts about sense-perception that make it difficult to understand how sense-perception could possibly work to give us knowledge of the world. According to Stroud, one such apparently undeniable fact is that 'it seems at least possible for us to perceive what we do without thereby knowing something about the world around us' (2000: 5-6). If it is true that our knowledge of the world is, in this sense, underdetermined by the evidence of our senses then it is hard to see how such knowledge is possible at all.⁴

The obvious way of dealing with this alleged difficulty is to argue that we have available to us perceptual means of knowing that do not underdetermine our knowledge of the world. Suppose that P is a proposition about the external world and that we sometimes see that P. Dretske calls this kind of seeing 'epistemic seeing'.⁵ It is not possible for us to see that P without thereby knowing something about the world around us because this kind of seeing *entails* knowing. However, this observation gets us nowhere if it turns out that there are insuperable obstacles to our ever being able to see or perceive epistemically. So the next stage is to show that there are no such obstacles. Finally, we might want to say something about what makes epistemic seeing or perceiving possible. Once we have identified one or more means of knowing about the world, shown that they really are means of knowing, and explained what makes it possible to know by these means, we have answered the question "How is knowledge of the world possible?".

Other familiar how-possible questions that are amenable to a multi-levels treatment include 'How is knowledge of other minds possible?' and 'How is *a priori* knowledge possible?'. I identify perception as a means, though not the only means, of knowing what another person is thinking or feeling. I defend the idea that perception can be a source of knowledge of other minds and identify two *a priori* enabling conditions for knowing the mind of another by perceptual means. When it comes to *a*

⁴ The argument of this paragraph is a summary of Stroud (2000a).

⁵ See Dretske (1969).

priori knowledge, the key is to recognize that, like empirical knowledge, it has a range of sources. I discuss three non-experiential means of knowing and explain how they work to give us *a priori* knowledge. I argue, in opposition to Kant, that it is possible to explain how non-empirical knowledge is possible without any commitment to idealism, transcendental or otherwise.

My talk of the different levels of a philosophical response to a how-possible question should not be taken too literally. As I stress in the preface to my book, it is more a matter of a satisfactory response to a how-possible question having to do several different and interconnected things in the course of a single evolving enquiry. Talk of the different levels of a response to a how-possible question is simply a convenient way of describing and keeping track of the different aspects of such an enquiry. The multi-levels model is an attempt to capture the explanatory structure of Kant's approach to one of his central how-possible questions, and I argue that mainstream epistemology has a lot to learn from Kant's conception of what needs to be done to answer his question.

While my response to epistemological how-possible questions is clearly Kantian in inspiration it nevertheless parts company with Kant on one major issue. The disagreement concerns the role of transcendental arguments in connection with how-possible questions. Rightly or wrongly, Kant has been read as maintaining that an effective way of tackling such questions is to argue transcendently. Suppose that the question is: how is outer experience – perceptual knowledge of spatial objects-possible? A transcendental response to this question is one that identifies the necessary conditions for outer experience or tries to demonstrate that there must be outer experience because without it something else whose existence cannot be doubted – say inner experience- would not be possible. My claim is that neither style of transcendental argument can be said to explain how outer experience is possible.

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