REVIEWS

WOLGAST, E. H. : *Paradoxes of Knowledge.* Cornell University Press, Ithaca
and London, 1977, 214 pp.

In her introduction professor Wolgast states that she does not believe in
the viability of any unique theory of knowledge. Given the forbidding
complexity of our conceptualizations in matters of knowledge, belief, doubt,
verification, and the like, "it would be a mistake to suppose only one map exists
relating these" (p. 17).

What we *might* attempt, according to Wolgast, is to draw several, internal-
ly coherent maps with each map accessible from all others. The author regards
her present work as a prelude to this ambitious task.

It will already be clear that this is not a naturalistic approach to the theory
of knowledge. Knowledge is not conceived as being, basically, a state or a mode
of functioning of an information processing system, but rather as a concept, a
construct or a series of constructs people use and philosophers write about.
Wolgast's tradition is explicitly that of Moore and of analytical philosophy.

Is there, in view of the diverse strands of the philosophy of science and of
a rapidly developing science of cognition, still a subject matter for an analytical
theory of knowledge ? There will be one as long as we face genuine problems
which seem to depend on a careful analysis of the meaning of expressions for a
solution. The title of this book is therefore very well chosen — it is the
paradoxes of knowledge that justify the author's approach.

Undoubtedly, one of the most perplexing paradoxes of knowledge was
discovered by Edmund Gettier[1]. By giving two counter-instances, he showed
that the traditional and widely endorsed conception of knowledge as
constituting a justified, true belief is essentially incomplete. This result
prompted a huge and steady stream of articles[2]. To my surprise, I found in
Wolgast's book not a single reference to this lively discussion of Gettier's
paradox. Let us now give a brief account, then, of the paradoxes that Elizabeth
Wolgast *does* consider relevant from her point of view.

As her point of departure, Wolgast evokes Aristoteles' quandary about
Coriscus[3].

Sophist :   "Do you know Coriscus ?"
Answer :   "I do."
S :   "You know that man over there ?"
A :   "No, I do not."
S :   "That man is Coriscus. I conclude that you know him and that
             you don't know him. You've contradicted yourself."

In the first chapter ('Knowing and What It Implies') this classical paradox is
cast in terms of knowing that some object is a watch, while in fact that
object contains no watchworks. So one knows that it is a watch because it surely
looks like one, and one does nót, because an object without a watchworks is

definitely not a watch. According to Wolgast, such problems simply indicate that 'to know' is a phrase whose meaning shifts against different backgrounds; it is context-sensitive and no absolute set of necessary and sufficient conditions can be given to determine what it means to know something. But the author offers no further discussion of the precise shift of context which is held responsible. Once more we must remark that professor Wolgast touches but superficially upon the recent contributions to the problem of epistemic contexts in philosophical logic, though this has been a domain in which exciting discussions have taken place and where some undeniable progress has been achieved during the past decades[4].

We found one constructive suggestion regarding the sort of context which allows the knowledge-operator to penetrate into an implication[5]. Wolgast states that knowing P logically implies knowing every Q that is implied by P, provided that Q is a part of P. As a paradigm case she uses the knowing of a series of facts, such as knowing the capitals of all countries. If you truly know the series, it follows logically that you know all its elements. In all other cases, where the implication is not reinforced by a part-whole relationship, knowledge is not a penetrating operator. And "... to suppose that questions about knowing and their answers are *always* related in that particular way is the same as supposing that the part-whole relationship *always* characterizes a thing's relation to what it implies. And this assumption is false." (p. 37).

Wolgast's diagnosis is *prima facie* a convincing one. However, upon closer inspection, it appears to depend on the fortunate example of knowing part of a series. Not even the author's own initial discussion of the watch seems to fit into her scheme. In fact, she implies that nobody can know some object to be a watch unless all parts of it were identified and found to be intact. "Being part of" is not a simple notion, and being part of a watch or of an organization is quite a different thing than being an element of a series.

The distinction between knowing and believing is the topic of the second chapter — 'Do I Know or Only Believe ?'. We all recognize this distinction as a real and important one. In everyday life, we use it confidently and it seldom causes any trouble. But when, in philosophically inspired moments, we try to state the distinction explicitly and in a general way, confusions pop up everywhere. An example : when asked whether we believe or know something, we experience the distinction as a difference in state of mind. Then how come we may eventually be shown mistaken about it ? This 'paradox' vanishes of course if we adopt the aforementioned traditional concept of knowledge as justified, true belief. Though this construct may be incomplete (see Gettier) it is rich enough to explain the introspective as well as the fallibilistic nature of knowledge claims. This is not the opinion of professor Wolgast, however. She denies that there's anything 'external' to the distinctive character of knowledge : "If asked whether I know or believe a certain bush is an azalea, I would not answer with an investigation; the question concerned whether I *knew.*" (p. 42) This is perhaps a question of temperament, but I'm quite certain that if they

asked *me,* I would take a second look at the bush instead of going into mediation. Be that as it may, what is there for Wolgast to reflect upon if not the evidence, i.e. the degree of justification for the belief in question ?

Suppose Wolgast concedes to this point. She will next point to cases where our traditional conception fails. For instance, in a religious debate a person may claim to know that God exists in the absence of any compelling justification. I would regard this as a devious or at least as a special use of 'to know', which I can nevertheless comprehend from within the traditional conception : the narrowing down of this conception to its persuasive aspects under situational (contextual, topical, conversational) constraints. Instead, Wolgast insists on taking all actual modes of using 'knowledge' at face value. In so doing, she can brush away any theory of knowledge because sometime somewhere 'to know' was used otherwise — linguistically 'correct' and conversationally 'natural' to be sure.

Unsurprisingly, her conclusion is in the negative : "... by now it is clear and plain that the philosophical question 'Do I know or only believe ?' is an anomaly." (p. 61). She rightly observes that one does not have to be illogical to affirm 'I know P' at one moment and 'I do not know P' at the next (because of pragmatical or dialogical circumstance, I would add), but no background theory is offered in which such utterances may be rendered and made intelligible *ergo* non-contradictory.

Thinking and teaching about knowledge, many philosophers have felt the need to give some simple examples of what they know. The result of these efforts are typically sentences like : "I know that I have two legs." and "I know that Brussels is the capital of Belgium." Other philosophers (Wittgenstein in *On Certainty,* Norman Malcolm and our present author) remark that these sentences are in fact awkward utterances, ill-suited for their purpose : illustrating what one knows. They wonder why it is so difficult to give an uncontroversial and 'natural' example of something we know.

Wolgast treats this paradox in her third chapter 'Examples of What One Knows'. She traces the origin of the paradox back to an unwarranted and usually implicit view of knowledge as a class concept. Philosophers who have run into the problem, like Moore, tend to imagine that everything one knows can be considered as constituting one collection from which samples can be drawn. "The paradox stems from the assumption that we must know the very familiar things of our lives and surroundings, for otherwise they would fall outside the class of things we know." (p. 84). This, however, is a mistake. The many-sided use and meaning of 'to know' shows that the conception of knowledge as a collection is misguided and naive.

I'm ready to grant Wolgast this important point, but I am not convinced of her analysis. It seems to me that there is a simpler explanation for the 'paradox'. Consider once again the traditional definition of 'A knows that P' : 1) P has to be true; 2) A beliefs that P is true; 3) A has sufficient evidence for P. When a speaker wants to give an uncontroversial example of what he knows, he

wishes to avoid any debate with his audience over the satisfaction of the three necessary conditions. Thus, his caution leads to a rather trivial statement, a truism that indeed, outside of this context, no sane person would utter in the form 'I know ...'. I offer this quite common sense explanation, which is at variance with that of Wolgast, without the intention to resurrect knowledge as a class concept.

Similar with the foregoing paradox is the difficulty of 'Expressing Beliefs' — this is the title of Chapter IV. In the author's words : "The connection between our beliefs and what we say gives rise to a paradox : although it may be true that a person went to the pictures and doesn't believe that he did, he cannot assert this." This is a fine example of the need to supplement a syntax and semantics with a pragmatics of natural languages. An utterance may be syntactically irreproachable and semantically meaningful (ánd true), yet utterly absurd. On a pragmatical level, the paradox is easily resolved if one accepts that when A asserts P, he implies that he beliefs that P. But why should this be so ? According to Wolgast, this is a fundamental fact of language : "... sentences which are used to tell someone something simply do express the speaker's beliefs (...). They do this because it is their role to do it within the framework of language." (p. 103). If one asks, conversely, how we can recognize the expression of a belief, Wolgast's answer will by now be predictable : "... there is no definite class of sentences expressing beliefs" (p. 109).

With Chapter V, 'The Belief That I Exist', Wolgast has written a new episode in the continuing interpretation of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. The author tightly argues that the effort of Descartes, to prove that he truly believes in his own existence, was ill-conceived. As a by-product of her research, the author states that there can be no such thing as a logic of beliefs. Beliefs are discrete events that cannot be linked together in a deductive chain. "The grammar of belief-expression is not the grammar of propositional logic." (p. 139).

The problem confronted in the next chapter 'Common-Sence Beliefs', is the status of Moore's basic beliefs. Wolgast examines in particular how Moore defended what he considered as a truism, namely that time is real, against his critics Bradley and Mc Taggart, who denied the truth of this proposition. The author shows that Moore had not much of a defence against his opponents. She explains this fact as follows. The most general common-sense beliefs, that Moore regarded as a firm basis for our system of knowledge, are really no beliefs at all. They are rather grammatical artifacts stating presuppositions with respect to every possible context. These truisms are, in the absence of a relevant context, groundless and should go, literally, without saying. "We did not find them by examining foundations but by digging in the cellar." (p. 185). Therefore, says Wolgast, there is in fact no contradiction between 'Time is real' (Moore) and 'Time is unreal' (Mc Taggart and Bradley), because there are no beliefs involved. Where there are no beliefs, there can be no contradictions.

The subject of Chapter VII is skepticism : what, if anything, is certain ?

Ask a rational person the following two questions in this order :
1) Are you sure that Brussels is the capital of Belgium ?
2) Is there anything really certain ?
There's a good chance that the person responds unhesitatingly 'Yes' to the first question and, after some reflection, will answer 'No' to the second. Paradox ! Posing the general question seems to lead one directly to skepticism. In this chapter ('Dead Certainty'), Wolgast investigates how this comes about. Predictably, she begins by arguing that a person normally calls something 'certain' in view of a specific context. This observation leads her to the statement that, odd as it may seem, a thing is qualified as 'certain' only when there remains some room for doubt. Hence, if we take skepticism as stating that, whatever one asserts that he knows, or whatever he claims to be certain of, is a matter that someone may reasonably doubt, then the skepticist is right. Indeed trivially so, since according to Wolgast "the correct use of 'certain' is such that the reasonableness of doubt is assured by *saying* that a thing is certain." (p. 201). In other words : the philosophical puzzle of skepticism arises only out of confusions about language. No real problem is involved.

In the foregoing paragraphs, I gave a synoptic overview of the book's contents, interspersed with a few critical comments. I will conclude this short review with some more general remarks.

Let me state, first of all, that *Paradoxes of Knowledge* is a really charming philosophical book. It is very well written, elegantly composed and lightly argued. But I have some reserves with respect to its philosophy. This philosophy as we have seen must be situated in the tradition of ordinary language analysis. Now, I have certainly no objection against this approach in itself, as one of the possibly fertile points of view on questions of knowledge and belief. However, I strongly object to two subsidiary characteristics of Wolgast's work.

There is, first, her explicit pretention that the analytic approach pre-empties the theory of knowledge. She writes : "The philosophy of knowledge should not be concerned with what is certain and how we know it is. ... The right subject of the philosophy of knowledge is 'know' as it functions in ordinary settings and everyday affairs." (p. 204–205). Instead of arguing at length to the contrary, it may suffice to remark that problems about the reliability or 'certainty' of knowledge are genuine, and that countless many philosophers have contributed with a variety of methods to clarification and reconstruction of the issues involved. In case Elisabeth Wolgast is not prepared to regard these efforts as genuine philosophy, I respond, tongue in cheek, that the use of 'philosophy' in ordinary settings seems to be on my side.

Secondly, there is the author's general recipe for 'solving' philosophical paradoxes : "... contradictions found in philosophy do not do any 'harm' so long as the propositions do not express beliefs, and most of them do not." (p. 183), In order to reveal the 'true' meaning of propositions, a host of cases of actual use is collected, whereby all cases enjoy equal credibility. This uncritical method of analysis is not explicitly discussed in Wolgast's book. I think it is

outdated — more sophisticated standards of performance are required within philosophical analysis today6.

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NOTES

[1]Gettier, E.L. : 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge ?' *Analysis*, 1963, 23, 121–123.

[2]Admittedly, some of these contributions to the debate sensibly argue against Gettier that there is nothing wrong with the traditional definition. See e.g. Dawson, G. : 'Justified True Belief is Knowledge' *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 1981, 31, 315–329.

[3]*De Sphicistis Elenchis*, 179 b 3.

[4]I think especially about the work of Jaakko Hintikka, initiated with *Knowledge and Belief* (Cornell U.P., 1962) and the ensuing volumes *Models for Modalities* (Reidel, 1969) and *The Intentions of Intentionality* (Reidel, 1975).

[5]It was Dretske who first defined the expression '(completely) penetrating operator' as an operator 0 fulfilling the following requirement :

if $P \rightarrow Q$ then $0(P) \rightarrow 0(Q)$.

See 'Epistemic Operators' in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1970, 67, 1007–1023.

[6]E.g. Woodfield : 'The Method of Analysis', chapter II of his book *Teleology* (Cambridge U.P., 1979).