KNOWING AND MERELY THINKING

Knowing and Merely Thinking

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It is frequently asserted nowadays that if it doesn’t make sense to say “x merely thinks he knows that p,” it cannot make sense to say “x knows that p.” So far as I know, however, this fairly recondite principle has never been given an explicit defense: those who employ it (largely followers of the later Wittgenstein) seem to regard it as an obvious truism, something that can be seen to be true by simple inspection. Now I for one do not find it at all obvious; indeed, I am in some doubt as to whether it is even true. Since it has a number of interesting and, to my mind, unintuitive consequences, I want to take this occasion to examine its credentials.

1. Just what sort of reasons could one give for the principle in question? Perhaps a statement from someone who has used it will help. G. E. M.
Anscombe, in her Intention, had this to say: “there is point in speaking of knowledge only where a contrast exists between ‘he knows’ and ‘he (merely) thinks he knows.’”¹ This way of putting the matter recalls a familiar semantic principle which is clearly beyond doubt. C. D. Rollins has called it the “principle of non-vacuous contrast,” and with respect to the present issue it can be stated as follows: “there is point in speaking of knowledge only where the statement ‘he knows that p’ has some suitable, significant contrast.”²

2. Now if Anscombe’s statement is taken strictly, it seems to imply—if we assume she had something like the principle of non-vacuous contrast in mind—that “He (merely) thinks he knows that p” is the fundamental contrast for “He knows that p,” for according to her statement, the significance of “He knows . . .” is always to be measured by comparison with “He (merely) thinks he knows . . .”

This, I think, is a mistake. For “He doesn’t know that p” (or “He is ignorant of the fact that p”) is a perfectly suitable contrast for “He knows that p”—and the applicability of it alone should suffice to guarantee the significance of asserting the latter (regardless of whether “He [merely] thinks he knows . . .” is intelligible or not—for some value of ‘p’).

3. After all, it must be admitted that the cogency of the principle of non-vacuous contrast is rooted in the fact that every assertion contains an implicit denial of something—and what it denies is its contradictory. But “He (merely) thinks he knows that p” is not, in the logical sense, the contradictory of “He knows that p”; it is the contrary of “He knows that p.” And that they are contraries (not contradictories) can easily be seen from the fact that a person may not know that p (i.e., be ignorant of the truth of ‘p’) even though he has no thought or opinion about p whatsoever. Ignorance, that is, can exist without thought or opinion: false opinion is just a special case or form of ignorance; it is not the same thing as ignorance.

The principle of non-vacuous contrast cannot therefore show (by itself!) that the inapplicability, to a given individual, of “He (merely) thinks he knows that p” guarantees the inapplicability, to that individual, of “He knows that p.” And thus if Anscombe’s claim rests only on this principle, it rests on a very weak foundation.

4. Now the sense of “knowledge” under consideration is propositional knowledge, that is, knowledge that something or other is the case; and as G. E. Moore pointed out a long time ago, a necessary condition of having knowledge in this sense is that one have a certain belief or opinion. (Note: the words “belief” and “opinion,” as they are used here, are not synonymous with “mere belief” and “mere opinion.”) Since no statement can entail something that isn’t a statement (e.g., a meaningless string of words or a