Can Realists Know that They Know?*

Realists typically suppose that nonepistemic truth is an independent condition on propositional knowledge. Few philosophers, however, have seriously questioned the meta-epistemic consequences of combining alethic and epistemic variants of realism. In this paper I aim to show that the truth condition in the customary definition of knowledge presents an important problem for the realist at higher epistemic levels. According to my argument, traditional epistemic-logical analyses of metaknowledge fail because of their extensionalism and certain presuppositions they have about the satisfaction of the truth condition. I further suggest that we need a different approach to metaknowledge if (1) we want to retain alethic realism, and (2) we want our epistemological accounts to adequately explicate the meta-epistemic states of actual, evidence-bound cognitive agents.

Keywords: evidence, externalism, the KK-thesis, metaknowledge, realism, truth

1. The KK-thesis: Affirmations and Denials

Although one finds an immense literature on realism and metaknowledge separately, there has curiously been little interest in investigating how the two subject matters confront and inform one another. In this paper, I will make an attempt in that direction and try to answer the question of how realism stands vis-à-vis ordinary epistemic agents’ knowing that they know. At the outset, however, I need to briefly spell out my understanding of realism. I have offered elsewhere a tripartite classification and argued that we can distinguish

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the metaphysical, alethic, and epistemic aspects of the realist position.  

1. *Metaphysical realism* minimally claims that there is an external reality which is not the creation of minds, languages or conceptual schemes.  

2. *Alethic realism* holds basically that most of our statements bear their truth values independently of the evidential support that they have and independently of their justificatory status within a subject's belief system.  

3. *Epistemic realism* affirms the idea that propositional truth, as characterized by alethic realism, is a necessary condition on propositional knowledge.  

For the purposes of this paper I will take these three aspects of realism as essentially independent theses.  

My treatment involves a discussion of higher-level empirical knowledge and how it relates to first-level knowledge given certain claims of realism. The first point to observe is that there is *prima facie* a significant epistemological difference between these two levels: in the former case the object of knowledge is the cognizer's own epistemic state rather than a (mind-independent) fact. But when the matter is viewed from the standpoint of a philosopher who takes epistemic logic seriously, things may look different. It is common among epistemologists to carry out the task of analyzing an ordinary agent's higher-level doxastic, justificatory, and epistemic states such that the cognitive and semantic dimensions of the different levels of knowledge are largely left out of the epistemological picture. While philosophers who take the obvious advantage of such abstrac-

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1 See Baç (1999).  
2 For example, Kant is "minimally" a metaphysical realist since he does not believe that phenomena exhaust the realm of existence. But he is not a realist in a stronger ontological sense for he opposes the idea that there would be objects as we perceive them even if all sentient beings disappeared from the universe.  
3 The way I construe it, alethic realism does not have any direct metaphysical implications. Even an idealist can accept the idea that truth and justification are normatively distinct concepts. My description of alethic realism differs from the account William Alston offered in his *A Realist Conception of Truth* in that Alston's version comes with certain implications about the world. See especially Alston (1999, p. 49 and p. 84).  
4 One might balk at the idea of labeling a requirement about the truth condition as a realist position. However, as will become clear later, my reasons for such a choice are strategic. That is, my coining the term 'epistemic realism' is not meant to reflect a substantial divide among epistemologists. Many analytic philosophers take truth seriously and recognize the truth condition as an independent requirement upon knowledge. But there are exceptions. Most notably, Karl Popper (1975, especially Chapter 2) and R. Almeder (1992) explicitly defended a realist notion of truth and argued at the same time against the idea of rendering it a necessary condition of propositional knowledge. I will talk more about Almeder's realism in the last section.