

The Dreamer

As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake – indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep.

Does Descartes *know* what he is doing when he shakes his head and stretches out his hand?

Descartes, *Meditations*, 1641

Norman the Clairvoyant

Norman, under certain conditions which usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.

Does Norman *know* that the President is in New York City?

Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 1985

Ten Coins and a Job

Suppose that Smith and Jones have applied for a certain job. And suppose that Smith has strong evidence for the following conjunctive proposition:

(d) Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.

Smith's evidence for (d) might be that the president of the company assured him that Jones would in the end be selected, and that he, Smith, had counted the coins in Jones's pocket ten minutes ago. Proposition (d) entails:

(e) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.

Let us suppose that Smith sees the entailment from (d) to (e), and accepts (e) on the grounds of (d), for which he has strong evidence. . . .

But imagine, further, that unknown to Smith, he himself, and not Jones, will get the job. And, also, unknown to Smith, he himself has ten coins in his pocket. Proposition (e) is then true, though proposition (d), from which Smith inferred (e), is false.

Does Smith *know* that (e) is true?

Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?," 1963

The Fake Barns

Henry is driving in the countryside with his son. For the boy's edification Henry identifies various objects on the landscape as they come into view. "That's a cow," says Henry, "That's a tractor," "That's a silo," "That's a barn," etc. Henry has no doubt about the identity of these objects; in particular, he has no doubt that the last-mentioned object is a barn, which indeed it is. Each of the identified objects has features characteristic of its type. Moreover, each object is fully in view, Henry has excellent eyesight, and he has enough time to look at them reasonably carefully, since there is little traffic to distract him.

(1) Given the information, are you inclined to say that Henry *knows* that the object is a barn?

Suppose we are told that, unknown to Henry, the district he has just entered is full of papier-mâché facsimiles of barns. These facsimiles look from the road exactly like barns, but are really just façades, without back walls or interiors, quite incapable of being used as barns. They are so cleverly constructed that travelers invariably mistake them for barns. Having just entered the district, Henry has not encountered any facsimiles; the object he sees is a genuine barn. But if the object on the site were a facsimile, Henry would mistake it for a barn.

(2) Given the additional information, are you inclined to say that Henry *knows* that the object is a barn?

Alvin Goldman, *Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge*, 1976

The Airport

Mary and John are at the L.A. airport contemplating taking a certain flight to New York. They want to know whether the flight has a layover in Chicago. They overhear someone ask a passenger Smith if he knows whether the flight stops in Chicago. Smith looks at the flight itinerary he got from the travel agent and respond, 'Yes I know — it does stop in Chicago.' It turns out that Mary and John have a very important business contact they have to make at the Chicago airport. Mary says, 'How reliable is that itinerary? It could contain a misprint. They could have changed the schedule at the last minute.' Mary and John agree that Smith doesn't really *know* that the plane will stop in Chicago. They decide to check with the airline agent.

Does Smith really *know* that the plane will stop in Chicago?

Stewart Cohen, "Contextualism, Skepticism, and The Structure of Reasons"

Responses to Thought-Experiments in Epistemology

The Dreamer

Does Descartes *know* what he is doing when he shakes his head and stretches out his hand?

_____ Yes _____ No

Norman the Clairvoyant

Does Norman *know* that the President is in New York City?

_____ Yes _____ No

Ten Coins and a Job

Does Smith *know* that (e) is true?

_____ Yes _____ No

The Fake Barns

(1) Given the initial information, are you inclined to say that Henry *knows* that the object is a barn?

_____ Yes _____ No

(2) Given the additional information about the presence of barn façades in the area, are you inclined to say that Henry *knows* that the object is a barn?

_____ Yes _____ No

The Airport

Does Smith really *know* that the plane will stop in Chicago?

_____ Yes _____ No