

SKEPTICISM AND A LOGIC OF THE REASONABLE

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Luis Recaséns-Siches has made a significant contribution to contemporary philosophical thought by his emphasis upon a “logic of the reasonable”.¹ Although he has rejected narrow or doctrinaire interpretations of this view, he insists that a logic of the reasonable provides a primary foundation not only for theoretical and practical knowledge but also for judgments and decisions.² This essay will apply an interpretation of a logic of the reasonable to some controverted issues related to skepticism and knowledge.

This essay holds that reasonable justification of beliefs supported by evidence interpreted in a critically evaluated frame of reference provides a satisfactory basis for making knowledge claims. After discussing some uses of “rational” and “reasonable”, the notion of a frame of reference is examined in relation to making and interpreting knowledge claims. Some positions held by epistemological skeptics are discussed and rejected. Distinctions between different types of knowledge are made to support the view that both in ordinary and in technical uses reasonable justification can be given for asserting that in some situations one knows something. It is also held that knowledge claims related to contingent situations should be regarded as probable and corrigible rather than as certain or inflexible. After discussion of some objections to these views it is pointed out both that some resolution of differences in knowledge claims and value judgments can be anticipated but that others can be expected to persist in a pluralistic society.

In some contexts “reasonable” can be distinguished from “rational” on the basis of the type of justification that is provided for a conclusion. (This is the type of distinction that Recaséns-Siches emphasizes in his position that the courts of law should follow the practice of making “reasonable”

¹ I am indebted to my colleagues and students for criticisms made of an earlier draft of this essay.

² Luis Recaséns Siches emphasizes this point of view in various of his writings, See, for example, the last chapter in his *Tratado General de Filosofía del Derecho*, Second Edition (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, S. A., 1961), and “Juridical Axiology in Ibero-America”, *Natural Law Forum*, 3 (1958) pp. 135-169.

decisions rather than merely “rational” ones.)⁸ Such a distinction points to the tendency to use “rational” to develop or appraise the structure of an argument and is exemplified in Aristotelian or modern formal logic. Although judicial decisions are not written in the restricted format of Aristotelian or formal logic, instances of the use of these types of argument are found both in the opinions of courts and in arguments of cases before courts. Consider the form taken by the traditional alibi. “Not both can the accused have committed the crime and have been in a place other than where the crime was committed.” Or, “if the defendant was in a place other than where the crime was committed, then he could not have committed the crime”. “Rational” can have other meanings such as the denial that a position is absurd, that conduct is bizarre or that a statement is inconsistent. Recaséns-Siches can be supported in pointing out that a merely structural or formal use of “rational” is too restrictive to be applicable to the general format in which legal decisions are expressed. Thus, he points out that if dogs are prohibited by regulations from riding in passenger sections of trains, a conductor can also justify a refusal to permit bears from riding in passenger sections of trains by a reasonable interpretation of the meaning of the regulation even though bears are not specifically mentioned in the regulations.

“Reasonable” can have a broader interpretation than “rational”. The term is used to claim that a belief, a knowledge claim, a perspective, an evaluation, or an action is justifiable on the basis of relevant interpretations of evidence in an acceptable frame of reference to a qualified peer group. Since peer groups vary significantly in their ability to develop satisfactory frames of references and to identify and interpret significant evidence, variations are to be expected regarding warranted knowledge claims and value judgments.

A logic of the reasonable can represent an intermediate and tenable position between the views of a thorough-going skepticism on the one hand and of claims to epistemological certainty on the other. It recognizes that knowledge claims do occur in a frame of reference rather than in a vacuum. To hold that “the assertion p is true” or that “judgment p is sound” has to be evaluated on the basis of the frame of reference in which it occurs. The frame of reference needs to be appraised by such criteria as the following. It needs to be consistent with warranted assertions, complete in terms of inclusion of available data, coherent in relating differing aspects of the context to each other, and adequate in terms of its applicability to different parts or aspects of the context and to new events. It also needs to have explanatory value to account for the present in terms of the past and to guide present experience in adaptation to new experience. A frame of reference itself is to be regarded as dynamic rather than fixed. Since criteria

⁸ Luis Recaséns Siches, “Logic of the Reasonable as Differentiated from the Logic of the Rational”, in *Essays in Jurisprudence in Honor of Roscoe Pound*, ed. Ralph A. Newman (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1962), pp. 192-221.

of acceptability are applicable to different contexts, some frames of reference can be shown to be inadequate and others can be shown to be more worthy of acceptance than others. Both the frame of reference and the assertions made within this frame of reference are subject to modification and correction on the basis of further criticism, additional information and new experience.⁴

In making a knowledge claim, it usually is held that at least three distinguishable elements are involved. Consider the assertion, "I know that p is the case". This knowledge claim, by traditional analysis, includes the following notions: "I believe p", "p is true", and "holding that p is the case is justifiable by adequate evidence reasonably interpreted". The frame of reference is basic in the justification of a knowledge claim since it is essential in the development of "adequate evidence reasonably interpreted".⁵

Epistemological skeptics tend to evaluate some knowledge claims either apart from any frame of reference or by juxtaposing assertions made in different frames of reference without acknowledging their contextual differences. To use an overworked example, it is true that in Euclidian geometry the shortest distance between two points is a straight line and that in Riemannian geometry the shortest distance between two points is a curved line. However, it is confusing to assert that we cannot know in a given context what is the shortest distance between two objects since these two geometries differ in their proposals. Each statement is related to a context and each can be correct in that context. If the questions are asked, "How can the shortest distance to an automobile in the next block be determined or what is the shortest distance to the planet Jupiter from Cape Kennedy be measured", then the issue becomes the determination of the appropriate context, that of Euclidian geometry, that of Reimannian geometry or that of another geometry, to provide an appropriate answer. Which geometry will guide planning and actions to bring about that set of events which will provide the most satisfactory solution to the immediate problem as well as to similar problems in the future?

Some epistemological skeptics claim that adequate justification can be given to deny knowledge of both formally necessary statements as well as contingent statements.⁶ They point to the possibility of our being deceived

⁴ An historical source for this notion of a "frame of reference" in addition to Luis Recaséns-Siches is the development of Ortega's claim that "I am I and my circumstances". Other philosophers including G. E. Moore, A. N. Whitehead, and Stephen Pepper have made use of this general notion.

⁵ For further discussions of this controverted issue, the following articles are relevant. J. A. Barker, "A Paradox of Knowing Whether", *Mind*, 84 (1975), pp. 281-283. O. R. Jones, "Can one Believe What One Knows?" *The Philosophical Review*, 84, (1975), pp. 220-235. Peter Unger, "A Defense of Skepticism", *The Philosophical Review*, 80, (1971), pp. 198-219. L. S. Carrier, "Skepticism Made Certain," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 71 (1974), pp. 140-150.

⁶ See Keith Lehrer, "Why Not Skepticism?" *Philosophical Forum*, 3 (1971), pp.

or misguided as grounds for denying that we know tautologous statements to be true. Any formal statement requires for its interpretation the frame of reference or system of which it is a part. For a skeptic to assert that within a given formal system, we cannot know that a particular assertion is true, not only is logically odd but it is false. Given the meanings of basic terms, an adequate clarification of fundamental operational procedures and of elementary postulates within the system, then it is possible to state "I know that the assertion 'p and not p' is false" and that its contradiction, ("it is not the case both that p and not p"), is true.

Contingent statements obviously present greater difficulty in dealing with arguments of skepticism. Postulates or assumptions which may be less rigorously clarified than in formal context are involved in this instance. In buying a new set of tires for an automobile, the buyer states that he needs size H-78-15. He can be asked, "Do you know that this is the correct size?" He can point out that this size was used on the wheel in the past, that the manual for his automobile states that this is the proper size for the wheel, and that H-78-15 is the number on the present tire on the car. With proper tools he could measure the size of the wheel. He also could propose that this size tire be placed on the wheel to determine if it functions properly. It is conceivable that on any one of these issues, he is mistaken and that at least some assumptions of the context in which he is speaking can be challenged. However, if the context within which he makes the assertion can be reasonably justified on the basis of criteria for evaluating acceptable frames of reference it is reasonable to claim that he knows that the size of the tire needed is H-78-15. To assert that he knows "the assertion x to be true" in this situation is to hold that he can adequately justify his statement to a qualified body of peers, but it does not require the further claim that such knowledge is either certain or incorrigible.⁷

Knowledge claims can relate to distinctions some philosophers have made between "knowledge by acquaintance" and "knowledge by description". The distinction between these notions in this context is more analogous to the differences between the Spanish usage of "*conocer*" and "*saber*" than the more highly restricted distinctions proposed by Bertrand Russell. Both types of knowledge require a frame of reference and interpretations within that context. The frame of reference is more elaborate in the case of knowledge by description than it is in the case of knowledge by acquaintance. I am immediately acquainted with spots of color, geometric lines and a certain sound which I associate with the hum of an electric motor as I type this page. In this frame of reference I also associate this type of awareness

283-298. Lehrer presents a more detailed analysis of his views in a more recent work, *Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

⁷ Alan R. White, in his essay, "Certainty", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 46 (1972), pp. 1-18, argues that certainty is not prerequisite to knowledge. This essay also has an excellent bibliography on this issue.

with an electric typewriter. The typewriter also responds to my manipulation so that the keys which I touch produce the characters which I anticipate. It appears to be reasonable in this context for me to state that I know in the sense of "being acquainted with" that this instrument which I am using to write the words of this essay is a typewriter.

In knowledge claims based upon knowledge by acquaintance, postulates or assumptions that may not be demonstrable are made. For example, in asserting that "I know that the instrument being used to write this essay is a typewriter", the frame of reference includes such postulates as the reality of an external world, that other minds can understand the meaning of my statements, that my senses are to some degree reliable, that certain uniformities hold between events and other postulates. The claim is not being made that such postulates or assumptions are also known to be true. Rather they are a part of a frame of reference, which, if it is challenged, would need to be justified by criteria indicated as appropriate for their appraisal. It is conceivable that I am dreaming or having a hallucination just as it is conceivable that you are dreaming or having a hallucination as you read this essay. However, given the context in which these events are occurring and other tests which still can be performed, it appears reasonable to hold that I know that this machine not only is in front of me as a physical object but also that this object is a typewriter and that it is operating in a 'satisfactory manner.

The knowledge about this typewriter on the part of a person reading this essay is by description. Even though elaborate details are presented about this particular machine, he is not acquainted with it. His knowledge of typewriters will condition his willingness to accept these statements regarding my use of this typewriter in writing this essay. He would not be claiming that such knowledge is either infallible or incorrigible.⁸ If he is a critical reader, he will be uneasy that he does not have additional evidence other than that being reported by a single individual regarding this matter. Granted that he can question the adequacy of the evidence to support my claims regarding my use of the typewriter, he can know that the writer of this sentence is making the claim that he is using a typewriter.

Can we know things that are not verbalized? "Knowing how" to perform a particular skill does not require an ability to verbalize the particular steps or movements involved in the performance of the skill although articulation of such steps can be helpful in developing such techniques. Interns can learn some techniques of surgery by watching a skilled surgeon perform an

⁸ Cf. Manley Thompson, "Who Knows", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 67 (1970), pp. 856-869. Thompson states, "From this point of view all cases in which one is said to have knowledge belong in a context of inquiry, since a belief supported by reasoning is a belief attained by inquiry. Even knowledge resulting from direct perception is to be viewed in this way..." "Every belief attained by inquiry is subject to correction by further inquiry; at no point is there an ultimate stop that once and for all distinguishes knowledge from probable opinion." pp. 885, 886.

operation. Unverbalized instances of “knowing that” also occur. A person may know that a stairway is ahead and that he will stumble if he does not step up without verbalizing such knowledge. A person may know the general arguments he plans to use before a legislative committee prior to verbalizing the content of the planned testimony. Instances of “knowing that” appear to be capable of verbalization even though they may not be verbalized in their initial stages. Such non-verbalized knowledge can be appraised by the person claiming to know in such a context as accurate or inaccurate or as instrumental or deterrent in consummating an anticipated experience. It is not particularly illuminating to characterize such knowledge experience as true or false, terms which appear to be applied more appropriately to assertions about such knowledge claims.

Is the truth value of knowledge claims constant? That is, can an assertion of a knowledge claim made on one occasion be true and can the same assertion made under relevantly similar contingent circumstances be false? This is a question whose meaning needs amplification and clarification. The Aristotelian principle of identity holds that “if the assertion *p* is true, then the assertion *p* is true”. Any challenge of this principle in an argument assumes the applicability of this principle to statements in the argument. Such arguments would involve the absurdity of having to assume a position which the argument purports to deny. However, the principle of identity does not require a static or fixed notion of the applicability of “true or false” to assertions. Assertions are true or false in a particular frame of reference or context. More broadly interpreted the principle of identity involves the additional notion that “if assertion *p* is true in frame of reference *A*, then assertion *p* is true in frame of reference *A*”. It may also be the case that the assertion *p* is false in context *B* even though the contingent situation is relevantly similar in each case. Frames of reference change with new information and new experience. Judgments of truth values of a particular statement also can change as the frame of reference changes. In classical mechanics electrons can be regarded as moving in a continuum. In quantum mechanics electrons can be interpreted as jumping without moving through a continuum. Thus, in one frame of reference it is true to assert, “Electrons move in a continuum”, and in another frame of reference it also can be true to assert, “Electrons do not move in a continuum”. However, one statement might be more useful in a given situation than another since its frame of reference would be more satisfactory in dealing with a particular problem. Likewise, one frame of reference could be held to be more satisfactory than the other on such grounds as greater applicability or completeness.

If contingent knowledge claims are corrigible, then the objection can be made that an incongruity develops in asserting both that “I know *p* is true”, and that “I may be mistaken in asserting that *p* is true”, or that “I know that the corrigible assertion *p* is the case”. A part of the difficulty arises

in attempting to hold that a knowledge claim also requires the notion that what is known is certain in some objective sense. If objective certainty is required, then the postulates in any frame of reference for an assertion also would need to have objective certainty. Such a requirement for a frame of reference appears unreasonable since the frame of reference is an acknowledged construction which is inappropriately appraised by such terms as true or false. Since contingent knowledge claims are evaluated in relation to the context or frame of reference in which they are made and since this frame of reference is not characterized by objective certainty, such knowledge claims cannot be regarded as objectively certain. To assert that "I know that the contingent statement *p* is the case" is to make a statement that is corrigible and characterized by probability rather than objective certainty. To assert that "I know the contingent statement *p* is the case" is to hold that the evidence for statement *p* interpreted in an appropriate frame of reference justifies the assertion that "I know *p*".

Another objection to the views set forth in this exposition is that consistent frames of reference together with knowledge claims supported by the context can be developed without our willingness to accept either the frame of reference or the knowledge claims. Consider such areas as astrology, witchcraft or parapsychology. In such cases the frame of reference as well as the specific evidence that is advanced needs investigation. Frames of reference for astrology and witchcraft conceivably could meet a consistency test but they fail to meet the other essential considerations such as coherence, adequacy and explanatory value. Consistency alone within a frame of reference does not provide adequate justification for acceptance of a knowledge claim. In astrology or witchcraft, knowledge claims repeatedly have specific deviations from anticipated consequences and have to be propped up indefinitely by use of *ad hoc* considerations. Frames of references with fewer assumptions, wider applicability and more extensive explanatory value are available. Parapsychology, although in a different class from witchcraft and astrology, has yet to provide acceptable evidence to substantiate some of its claims. Such evidence appears in some cases to be manipulated by its researchers and in other cases it is not statistically significantly different from results that might occur by random sampling procedures. A disposition to reject the views of witchcraft and astrology more readily than parapsychology is based on the prevalence in the views of parapsychology to accept fewer disparate features in its frame of reference and to manifest a greater conformity on the part of some advocates in recognizing conditions essential for sound statistical validation of hypotheses.

It could be argued that the disagreement with skepticism set forth in this paper is essentially verbal or semantic in character. The view of "reasonable justification", a skeptic could argue, is too weak a condition for a person to claim that he has knowledge. With a stronger term such as "completely justified", then the possibility of the position set forth here slips into skept-

ticism particularly with regard to knowledge claims related to contingent situations. For example, Keith Lehrer in his essay, "Why not Skepticism?" argues that "we do not know anything". He further states, "I shall assume that if a man knows *that p*, then he is completely justified in believing *that p*" and that "completely justified true belief is a necessary condition of knowledge..." He claims that neither "logical or mathematical truths" nor "some of our present conscious states" meet this necessary condition.⁹ Lehrer's acknowledged assumption that knowledge requires "completely justified true belief" is too rigid and inflexible position for an ordinary or customarily critical claim for the meaning of the statement, "I know that the assertion *p* is true". His criteria for "completely justified belief" is set forth in such a manner that even if the attaining of knowledge is logically conceivable, knowledge is practically unattainable. On the contrary this paper holds that "reasonably justified belief" interpreted within a corrigible frame of reference approximates more closely the usual meanings associated with knowledge and that it also provides some basis for dealing with both theoretical and practical knowledge claims.¹⁰

A critic to the position set forth in this essay could propose that serious difficulties remain with regard to the resolution of disputes involving knowledge claims. This problem is evident in any position taken with regard to ground for making justifiable knowledge claims. A significant issue is whether differences regarding such knowledge claims can be resolved in this proposed position at least as well as in other proposed positions. Evidence and its relevance and interpretation are fundamental in the resolution of such disputes. Frames of references are recommended as a means for supporting claims of relevance and the acceptability of such interpretations. Development of such frames of reference are involved in professional, scientific, technical and vocational preparation. They provide a means both for gaining knowledge and in the application of such knowledge to theoretical and practical problems. For example, elaborate systems of measurement such as the metric system are developed within a frame of reference and facilitate both the gaining and interchange of knowledge and the resolution of disputes. Recognition of the need for such frames of reference can assist in the identification of the source of a dispute. A review of the evidence related to the dispute and reexamination of frames of reference in which knowledge claims or value judgments are interpreted facilitate the reduction of areas

⁹ Lehrer, *op. cit.*, pp. 284, 285.

¹⁰ Nelson Goodman points out that however strong initial evidence for a statement may be, the statement will be discarded if it fails to satisfy as well as possible, "the totality of claims presented by all relevant statements". "Sense and Certainty" in *Empirical Knowledge*, eds. Roderick M. Chisholm and Robert J. Swartz (Edgewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 1973, p. 363. The book in which this essay appears contains an excellent series of essays. Many of the writers in this work acknowledge, as do I, an intellectual debt to C. I. Lewis. Background for what is proposed here as a frame of reference also has roots in Lewis's view of a "pragmatic *a priori*" and the empirical.

of disagreement. Prevalence both of differences regarding knowledge claims and value judgments and of procedures for resolving some of these differences is to be expected in a pluralistic society.

In summary, a logic of the reasonable rejects both epistemological skepticism and dogmatism in the interpretation of knowledge claims. Assertions of knowledge claims needs to be evaluated both on the basis of relevant evidence and of a frame of reference in which the evidence is interpreted. Criteria for evaluating frames of reference are recommended as a basis for reducing areas of disagreement regarding knowledge claims. In advancing both ordinary and technical knowledge claims an appeal to “adequate evidence reasonably interpreted” rather than to “completely justified true belief” provides a standard which satisfies basic anticipations for advancing a knowledge claim and for acknowledging that such claims can be mistaken. Even if it is not likely that some disputes cannot be resolved either by this proposal or by any other yet advanced in a manner that is consistent with expectations in a pluralistic society, the range of differences in knowledge disputes can be reduced and the areas of agreement can be increased.