

Knowing Infallibly: A Case for Infallible Phenomenal Knowledge

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Abstract

Fallibilism, the thesis that no belief can be known for certain, has become a popular view in epistemology. The certainty of our perceptions, inductions, faculties of reason, and even self-knowledge are regularly challenged. On this view, most of epistemology then deals with knowledge that is probably fallible. However, knowledge of our own primitive feelings may avert the likely fallibility of other sources of knowledge. In this paper I argue that primitive feelings are an infallible source of knowledge even in the face of the strongest fallibilist challenges, by exploring what kinds of things that, if believed, must be true. I address the matter first by determining what kinds of things that, if they are true, we must be justified in believing if and when we believe them. Next I determine what can be believed only if true. Then I show that primitive feeling fulfills both of these. Finally, since primitive feelings do fulfill these requirements, I show that if the feelings are believed then necessarily they are also known for certain. Then I address challenges that pose issues for self-knowledge and explain how they do not create real problems for primitive feelings even if they do for other kinds of self-knowledge. Through this process, I refine into a tightly understandable category what constitutes these sorts of feelings that, if believable, are also infallibly knowable. From there we can come to know for certain some things about the world we exist in.

Keywords: Epistemology, Fallibilism, Phenomenal Knowledge

1. Introduction

That we have substantial amounts of knowledge is generally accepted, however with the caveat that we can have only minimal or no infallible knowledge. However I will demonstrate we actually have substantial infallible knowledge on phenomenal foundations. I will begin by clearly defining infallible knowledge. Then I will address immediate fallibilist challenges based on language and in doing so arrive at how we do have infallible knowledge from our phenomenal experiences. Following this I will address other challenges, showing that they ultimately fail. After this I will show that the infallible knowledge is significant in itself and its application.

2. Defining Infallible Knowledge

To begin, we need to precisely define infallible knowledge. We will arrive at infallible knowledge being any knowledge with truth necessarily following from the justification and the justification not possibly being faulty. Fallible knowledge is commonly understood just as knowledge which is possibly false. That is, x fallibly knows p if and only if x knows p and p is possibly false. However, if p is false, then x does not know p . This reduces the definition to all knowledge of contingent things being fallible and all knowledge of necessary things being infallible, which does not capture the meaning of fallible knowledge. If we turn to an epistemic notion of possibility, then all knowledge which is necessary as far as we know must be infallible, which is circular as then infallible knowledge is knowledge which we know is infallible. Fallible knowledge can instead be defined as knowledge such that the justifying

evidence does not necessitate the truth of the belief. That is, x fallibly knows p if and only if x knows p and x 's evidence for believing p also allows for p being false. Following this, infallible knowledge is knowledge such that the evidence does not allow the possibility of false belief. That is, x infallibly knows p if and only if x knows p and x 's evidence for believing p does not allow for p being false. If the evidence does not possibly not entail p then it necessarily entails p . Thus x infallibly knows p if and only if x knows p and necessarily if x is justified in believing p then p . Considering the last conjunct under possible world semantics reaffirms its accurate depiction: in every world if x has the relevant justification for belief in p in the world, then p is true in the world.

In his article "Failable Knowledge," Stephen Hetherington suggests this definition is unsatisfactory as it forces all necessary truths to be known infallibly if known¹. For example, if we consider $2+3=5$ under the normal rules of arithmetic a necessary truth then if I believe it I cannot be wrong. In fact I have necessary justification as in every possible world $2+3=5$ is true. While the belief cannot be wrong, the justification can fail to justify the belief. This is where he introduces the concept of *failable* knowledge: x has failable knowledge that p if and only if x knows p and there exists accessible possible worlds where p is false and x has the same good evidence or x fails to believe or fails to have the same good evidence². Accessible worlds are defined as those that include two of the following: p , x believes p , and x has the same good evidence for believing p . Returning to our example $2+3=5$, p is true in every world, but in some worlds x may fail to believe p or x may fail to have available the same good evidence. Young children for example could come to believe $2+3=5$ sooner or later than they do. While one may learn this fact of addition in June of some year, they could have learned it in May or July even with the June presentation in either other possibility. Thus they can have the same good evidence available while not believing. Alternatively they may hear that $2+3=5$ with zero explanation but believe what they heard anyway. In this case they have the belief but not the justification. In either case we have $2+3=5$ as a piece of failable knowledge as there are accessible possible worlds where x fails to believe or fails to have the same good reasons.

The concept of failable knowledge lends more significance to the presence of good reasons. We can define infallible knowledge then as knowledge such that x knows p infallibly if and only if x knows that p and there exists no accessible possible worlds where p is false and x has same good evidence or x fails to believe or fails to have same good evidence. In other words, x 's knowledge of p is infallible only if p and x must believe p and x must come to have the same good reasons for p . Thus the truth, belief, and justification for a piece of knowledge must all entail each other. While infallible knowledge addresses the issue of a conditional between the evidence and a necessary truth, it's overly stringent in requiring the same good evidence and in requiring belief be entailed by the truth. Presumably if I were to know something for certain, the possibility of my not having believed it in the first place does not negate infallibility. Moreover if I had acquired the knowledge via different reasons but similarly good reasons, the knowledge would still be infallible. On the other hand if one successfully comes to know something infallibly, one also knows that something infallibly. Thus infallible knowledge is a subset of infallible knowledge, but does not exhaust all infallible knowledge.

With the benefits considering infallibility has over considering infallibility in mind, a definition of infallible knowledge that more accurately captures what is meant by infallible knowledge can be found. The most significant move is creating a stronger connection between the justification and infallible status. Necessary truths create the loophole that they do because the conditional if x is justified in believing p then p is always satisfied because of p 's necessity, removing the role of justification. The definition of knowledge already contains justification, but the justification not possibly being faulty needs to be added as a further constraint. That is, the mechanism responsible for the knowledge must itself be a perfectly reliable source of knowledge. This fixes the issue with necessary truths as one can have beliefs about, say, algebraic topology that if true are necessarily true but the knowledge is nonetheless fallible as one is not certain about whether their beliefs are indeed true because their faculty of reason is imperfect. Even in the simple $2+3=5$ case this prevents delusion from allowing the belief $2+3=6$ to somehow slip in as infallible knowledge as the rational creation of beliefs is itself part of the process of justification. In this case the justification includes the well-functioning of one's faculty of reason.

The fallible-infallible divide then must be externalist as the conditions rely on external factors. We can have deductively proven knowledge that according to all internal factors cannot possibly be incorrect, but with a faulty faculty providing the grounds³ for our knowledge, the knowledge may be actually incorrect. An externalist conception of fallibility will capture that possibility. For this reason an accurate depiction of infallibility requires an externalist framework. In addition, the justifiers need not be known by the knower. In fact the infallible knowledge that is acquired phenomenally is known prior to any sort of justificatory reasoning occurs in the mind⁴. Thus again an internalist framework will be left inadequate to describe the infallibility or fallibility of knowledge, regardless of how knowledge is normally considered.

Thus we come to consider infallible knowledge to be any knowledge that truth necessarily follows from the justification and the justification is not possibly faulty. Formally defined, x infallibly knows p if and only if x knows p , the justification for p necessarily entails p , and x 's justification for believing p is not possibly faulty⁵.

3. Finding Infallible Knowledge

Self-knowledge provides at least one kind of infallible knowledge in the form of knowledge of one's own first-person experience, herein referred to as phenomenal knowledge. Common fallibilist challenges to self-knowledge come in the form of categorization challenges. One may experience a sensation and afterwards may describe it as, for example, pain incorrectly. However, this process of description itself introduces opportunities for and explains any error. The one experiencing the sensation may be incorrect in his or her categorizing the sensation as pain due to an error in reason, error in understanding the word "pain", or error in memory. None of these challenge their knowing what they sense at the time they are sensing it; they only introduce doubt to the faculties of reason and memory. Hamid Vahid argues that if one believes one is in pain, or some other feeling, one's belief is certainly true⁶. This holds only if we consider the belief that oneself is in pain to be distinct from believing the sentence "I am in pain," as I can believe the word "pain" describes my feeling while being incorrect, but I cannot be wrong about the internal feeling that, if the sentence is correct, is being referred to as pain. Instances of phenomenal knowledge then are cases of infallible knowledge.

If language is entirely dependent on what the user means, independent of any connections to other words or categories, then necessarily if x knows the content p of a sentence s then x infallibly knows p if p is considered to be the internal phenomena rather than any sort of mapping or categorization⁷. One may object to the notion of any sort of propositional p being directly acquired as phenomena. However, with any perception comes a thatness and a thereness, the thatness and thereness being constituents of the phenomena themselves. Thus they can at least be understood propositionally as that is there. For example, the perception of yellow is at a point in the field of vision or a feeling of joy is in oneself. While these examples suggest subjectivity and thus a return to a form of internalism or fallible beliefs, the beliefs are regarding one's perceptions and feelings, ergo they are correct from an externalist conception, even despite due to not having access to others' experiences, no actual verification is possible.

With a definition of infallibility in play and the immediate challenges of categorization disarmed, we can now move to demonstrate the infallibility of phenomenal knowledge. If x is perceiving p ⁸ then x believes p , has good evidence for believing p , and p . Thus x knows p . Thus p , x believes p , or x has the same good evidence for believing p in any accessible world. Necessarily if x perceives p then x has good evidence for believing p . Thus p or x believes p . Necessarily if x perceives p then p and x believes p . Thus knowledge that p is infallible by the definition of infallible knowledge, and as established, this shows knowledge that p is infallible. Returning to our definition of infallible knowledge, we can confirm that x does know p , the justification for p —perception p —also necessarily entails p as one's perception p entails itself. The justification is also not possibly faulty as if x did not perceive p then not p . Moreover the justification does not contain any implicit beliefs or premises that are subject to defeaters or error.

Now we may turn to some remaining challenges to infallible knowledge. Gettier cases⁹ as found in in Edmund Gettier's "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" inspire such a challenge: one may come to believe something true and have justification but only be correct due to luck. However, these basic sorts of infallible knowledge are immune to being based on luck. Here I will examine this knowledge under one such case as it presents a luck-based case of justified true belief. Let there be some justified belief p which entails the now-justified belief q , and then p turns out to be false but q true¹⁰. Using the that-there type of phenomenal knowledge, we can break away the that or there. For example, say I believe yellow is there due to a perception, "yellow" in this case referring to the yellowness perception itself, not my mental category of yellow. This entails I believe yellow is somewhere as all changing there to somewhere does is weaken the proposition. Note however the initial yellow is there must be true as if it were not I would not perceive it. Thus this case is inapplicable.

With lucky cases now settled for infallible knowledge, we can move to the possibility of persistent deception by an evil demon. The skeptical challenge as presented by Hetherington asserts that a demon may be feeding you all of your perceptions, sensations, etc. and thus nothing you know is true. In more extreme cases, the demon is able to fiddle with your mental faculties themselves, able to delude you into thinking things like $2+3=4$ ¹¹. However, in the case of perceptions spawning from a demon rather than a normally-conceived external world the statements making infallible knowledge based on qualia infallible and knowledge still hold. The object arises that the thatness being perceived is not real or the thereness is not real, however something is being perceived somewhere. While one may make an error in interpretation and assume no such demon exists, this error comes in after the initial knowledge is acquired. This mirrors David Chalmers's assertion that one living in the matrix is not victim to persistent error but rather a different metaphysics. He argues that the things people in the matrix, a computer simulation that is indistinguishable from the real world to those inside, believe are not generally wrong. When one believes they are on a boat, they are indeed on a boat—they're at most mistaken about the metaphysical nature of the boat¹². Similar to how being fed perceptions by the matrix merely moves the objects of belief to those within the matrix, being fed perceptions by a demon merely

move the objects of belief to the demon. For example, if I believe yellow is there, there happens to be a construction of the demon rather than atoms or God or some other thing that is not a demon. From here the demon challenge is no more threatening to infallible knowledge than it is to fallible knowledge. The world still seems to behave fairly consistently, so if infallible knowledge has utility then that utility is not threatened by possible demons. At worst we are severely limited in how certain we can be about the ultimate grounding of reality.

4. Expansion

Now that some challenges have been addressed and we have a conception of infallible knowledge, we turn to expanding it beyond simple phenomenal knowledge. The reach of infallibility can be further extended via conjunction. If x infallibly knows p and infallibly knows q then x knows p , x knows q , x 's justification for p necessarily entails p , x 's justification for q necessarily entails q , x 's justification for believing p is not possibly faulty, and x 's justification for believing q is not possibly faulty. Then x clearly knows both p and q . The conjunction of the justifications must also necessarily entail the conjunction of the objects of belief as if j necessarily entails p and k necessarily entails q then j and k necessarily entail p and q individually since increasing the strength of the antecedent preserves truth. Then if j and k necessarily entail each p and q , they must entail both p and q . Finally if j is not possibly faulty and k is not possibly faulty, then j and k together are still not possibly faulty. Thus infallibility is preserved by conjunction. Unfortunately without infallibly knowing negations, expressional adequacy cannot be met as conjunction alone cannot be used to obtain any sort of negation statements. The question then arises of whether we can infallibly know negative claims. For example, can I know infallibly that it's not that case that yellow is there? One has access to everything they are consciously experiencing. Only a change in words is needed to go from yellow is there and joy is here and circle is there and every other current experience to it's not the case that red is there. This seems at first to be an instance of a reasonable process of elimination or application of the law of excluded middle, but these exclusions are necessary truths and are known implicitly automatically. For example, by knowing yellow is there for some specific there, you also implicitly know red is not there because of an inherent property of yellow. Thus while some excluded experiences require reason to acquire, such as I am not experiencing blue right now, others are just different facets of knowing the same complex phenomenon. Ergo we have some negative claims as infallible knowledge. With conjunction and negation, we have a logically complete system. While some mental activity goes unconscious, it is already outside the scope of infallible knowledge as people are regularly unaware of their own unconscious lives¹³. However since we do not know the entirety of our own minds, we can safely exclude some parts from what we consider in the domain of infallibly known as if we do not know or often even believe them then they are not of the same sort of experiences since one of the fundamental qualities of these experiences is being irresistibly known if true. Thus in experiencing all of one's current perceptions, feelings, sensations, etc. then anything excluded is simply not part of the experience.

These sorts of built-up beliefs can form an infallible groundwork for some necessary truths. While to use the tools properly requires a functioning sense of reason, it also offers an induction on infallible beliefs to acquire what are later used as deductive rules. That is, the credibility of deductive rules of reason is increased via induction on infallible knowledge. For example, the idea that something cannot be entirely red and entirely yellow is a simple example of alleged *a priori* knowledge. However, an alternative route of justification exists via induction on these infallible belief structures. For every red thing I see, I also see a not-yellow thing. Likewise, every yellow thing is also a not-red thing. Thus I acquire the knowledge that by definition if something is (entirely) yellow then it is not red and if something is red then it is not yellow. Rather than reaching into my mind for the concepts of these things, I pick them up through experiences. They then seem to be very reliable pieces of knowledge because of their infallible grounding despite being based on induction. While one may object that knowing this fact comes from inward reflection¹⁴, just understanding the concepts of yellow and red suggests they came from somewhere external to the self. Otherwise they are made-up axioms with coincidental relation to the world. Thus when normally thinking about yellow and red, the actual yellows and reds that are experienced are far more likely to be under consideration than the linguistic constructions.

In addition to knowing in the moment of experience, fallible knowledge of infallible knowledge and lack thereof can be used to know how to obtain certain infallible knowledge. Memory is an uncontroversially fallible mode of coming to beliefs and knowledge. While memory itself cannot generate infallible knowledge beyond knowing what one is remembering, it can be used to know how to put oneself in a situation to obtain desired infallible knowledge. For most cases of senses this works without much issue. If you want to experience yellow, look at a lemon. Emotional feelings present a less reliable mode of experience. I can remember a painting makes me feel sad when I view it, thereby giving me knowledge regarding sadness, but over time I may grow to not feel the same feelings. Record-

keeping offers a partial alternative to memory. While it introduces room for error in recording and reading, it removes the cognitive, consistency, and persistence issues of memory. Something can be recorded while known infallibly and later recovered for less error.

These connect to error in a more general sense. Rescher presents examples of how sure one can be and how as one broadens the scope of accepted beliefs one also accepts greater possibility of error. One such example is guessing the height of a tree. One may have a very high chance of error if trying to eyeball it to the nearest quarter-inch, though he asserts one can be “completely and absolutely sure that its height is between one inch and one hundred yards”¹⁵. I disagree with his level of certainty here: one may be misinformed as to the size of an inch or yard or may be under some form of sensory inability preventing absolute certainty. At most one may be so sure one sees what one internally defines as a tree is within an internal definition of those sizes. However this reduces our connection to the external world significantly and instead drives us toward an internal infallibilism, which as mentioned before is not what we are seeking. However, we can indeed have varying levels of closeness to freedom from error. In the case of things like memory and record-keeping of infallible knowledge one’s distance from certainty is entirely a function of reliability of one’s memory or record-keeping abilities. Likewise minor inferences from infallible knowledge are as certain as the power of reason being used to make the inferences. For things like observational sciences, this suggests a possible higher level of certainty than normally suspected by fallibilists. Thus the existence of infallible knowledge reduces uncertainty in knowledge generally.

Finally, since all phenomenal foundations¹⁶ or non-inferential deliverances are basically infallible, fallibility is a feature of flawed inferences. That is, we can narrow the scope of error to inferences we make, whether via reason or some other mechanism. However, Quine’s objection to phenomena having a that-ness and there-ness, claiming we should consider all experience as a whole rather than individual components presents an issue. Here I have reduced perceptions to propositions open to logic and arguably implicitly introduced sense-datum language to avert discussion of the actual world. He also denies a cleavage between the analytic and synthetic¹⁷. Though I have refrained from any explicit mention of divide between the two, the anti-inference position seems suspect, as is considering experience to be so deeply entrenched in knowledge. However, by considering experience as a whole is how multiple perceptions are able to be had at once. Extant knowledge, memory, and every other source of deliverances are parts of the whole of consciousness. Furthermore some analytic truths, like not being entirely red and yellow, are present in objects and perceived as such not by linguistic definition but by logical reality. These are to be considered in the same light as synthetic truths. Only if one makes a leap of faith in reason does one end up with a significant divide.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion we do have infallible knowledge, and it is significant in quantity and extension. Via close examination of the meaning of the term we can narrow it to any knowledge that truth necessarily follows from the justification and the justification is not possibly faulty, even when considering the use of rational faculties which may themselves be faulty. While our faculties may be susceptible to pervasive error, we cannot be wrong about some things, and many of those things have properties that entail our deeper certain knowledge. Thus a harsh sort of fallibilism denies certainty one actually has. However with a clear foundation of what is certain, uncertain knowledge ends up closer to certainty than without. With our infallible knowledge we can find further infallible knowledge we have, as well as establish firmer ground for various kinds of fallible knowledge and reacquire various pieces of infallible knowledge. Finally, we find a clear divide between the infallible and fallible as the same divide as between experience and inference.

6. Bibliography and Notes

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<http://doi.org/10.2307/2564624>
- 2 Ibid. 567.
- 3 One need not accept foundationalism for this point. The grounds may be the deliverances discussed by coherentists such as in Elgin, Catherine. "Non-foundationalist Epistemology: Holism, Coherence, and Tenability." *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, edited by Matthias Steup, John Turri, and Ernest Sosa, Wiley Blackwell, 2014, 244-254.
- 4 See Vahid, H. (2008). The Puzzle Of Fallible Knowledge. *Metaphilosophy*, 39(3), 325–344.
<http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.2008.00544.x> 327. for another argument that infallible knowledge must be considered in externalist terms.
- 5 The last conjunct may be replaced with x's justification being produced by a perfectly reliable mechanism.
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