Arguing in Support of the Proposition: Resolved that "Knowledge About Communication Can Only Be Known by the Knower"

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Abstract
I am speaking in support of this proposition - but not without hesitations. For once, I had agreed to debate another proposition. The one in front of us was crafted by one of its opponents, with the intent to oppose it. It is stacked in his favor and puts me in oppositions to his opposition. (Which is why I can't wholeheartedly support it). For another, it is ambiguous. It suggests unwarranted ontological assumption and a kind of abstract objectivism that I cannot support.

Keywords
communication, knowledge, knower, proposition

Disciplines
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Comments
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ICA Meeting in Chicago, IL, 1996.5.24  

I am speaking in support of this proposition - but not without hesitations. For once, I had agreed to debate another proposition. The one in front of us was crafted by one of its opponents, with the intent to oppose it. It is stacked in his favor and puts me in opposition to his opposition. (Which is why I can't wholeheartedly support it). For another, it is ambiguous. It suggests unwarranted ontological assumption and a kind of abstract objectivism that I cannot support.  

I shall present semantical and epistemological arguments in favor of the proposition - but not without qualifying it as I go on.  

When arguing from the perspective of semantics, one has to rely on dictionary definitions of the English language in the assumption that they account for common usage. From this perspective, I have to say: just as bakers are defined as producing food items by baking, just as actors are defined by performing in front of audiences, just as medical patients are defined by exhibiting medical symptoms of illnesses, my dictionary defines knowledge as what knowers know.  

Knowledge, knowing, and knowers form a triplet of terms that refer to each other. It is an instant of the “actor-action-target or -result” paradigm which occurs in many semantic domains of English. Accordingly, knowledge is what knowers have, possess, or exhibit in their behavior. Knowing equals being competent in a particular practice, whether this shows up in producing acceptable scholarly works, in giving correct answers to questions (as in so called knowledge tests), in achieving something against apparent odds (perhaps where others fail), or in demonstrating familiarity (with) or mastery of an art, a craft, including speaking a language. Knowledge is not demonstrable without a Knower.  

Clearly, knowledge can only be known by knowers. It constitutes a semantical truth within the English language and to me there is no point arguing against this proposition in the very English language in which that truth resides - unless, of course, its opponents deviate from this common understanding. I am anticipating four kinds of attacks on this proposition and want to show the fallacies of each.  

(1) Hiding the contradictions in their position.  
(2) Smuggling ontological metaphors into the debate.  
(3) Privileging some kind of knowledge at the expense of other kinds; and  
(4) Excluding themselves from the proposition, playing God.  

(1) Hiding the contradictions in their position.  

To reject the proposition that knowledge about communication can only be known by the knower, requires showing that there is knowledge that is known to non-knowers or that there is knowledge that escapes being known by any knower. Both are blatantly contradictory.  

From mathematics we know that inconsistent system of arguments can prove anything and end up saying nothing at all. If we allow contradictions to enter a system of arguments we might as well stop our debate for then anything will go.
(2) Smuggling ontological metaphors into the debate.

I say "smuggling" because this may not be noticeable at one’s first listening. I am not insisting on devious intents by the opponents of the proposition. It is quite possible that they are unaware of their being drawn into a certain reasoning by the metaphors they choose. I am inviting you to watch critically for ontological metaphors I expect they will use and avoid their entailments.

One example follows from talking of knowledge as something to be "acquired." "Knowledge acquisition" is not part of the proposition, of course, but it can be roped into the debate and thereafter shape its arguments. My dictionary offers two different senses of the word "acquisition:" (1) the coming into possession of some object or thing, regardless of means, as in purchasing a consumer product or giving gifts, and (2) the attainment of bodily or mental characteristics through sustained efforts, as in becoming someone.

The fact that "knowledge" is a noun favors the first sense of knowledge as a kind of entity. Talking of entities as acquirable, obtainable, findable, collectable, etc., smuggles into this talk a physical exchange metaphor that assumes things exist outside of us and before they can be acquired. Hence, this interpretation of "knowledge acquisition" implies that knowledge must have been there before it could be had.

A related example is the container metaphor, (in)famous in communication research and theorizing, as in saying that messages convey information, that meanings reside inside texts, that books have contents, that libraries are storehouses of knowledge, etc. This metaphor, too, renders knowledge as an entity existing outside knowers; an entity that authors must put into containers for ignorant recipients to afterwards remove.

Such reasoning, I must point out, has nothing to do with experiences nor with facts. Nobody can experience anything before experiencing it. Nobody can know before knowing. What could lead one to argue that knowledge exists before it is known is the result of having adopted an ontological metaphor for knowledge and of being drawn into the (onto)logic inherent to it. Those who argue against the proposition on grounds that knowledge must have been there before it was acquired are simply unaware of their being carried away by their own language.

I could just as easily bank on the second sense of "acquisition" (as the attainment of individual characteristics) and conclude with an equally compelling logic that knowledge is an individual accomplishment, that knowledge co- arises with one’s interactive involvement in a world that is at least in part one’s own construction. This choice would lead me to argue that messages contain nothing while traveling across spaces, that unread texts have no meanings until read by their readers, that libraries without people contain food for paperworms and for fires but no knowledge, whatsoever.

Either of these reasons derive entirely from the entailments of the chosen metaphor. Experientially, it is impossible to speak of one’s knowledge before having it. Those who argue against the proposition by claiming they could, have to show us knowledge they do not (yet) have - an obvious impossibility! They are then lead to talk of what they know nothing about - perhaps without realizing it.

(3) Privileging some kind of knowledge at the expense of other kinds.

Logically the proposition contains two presuppositions: (A) Knowledge about Communication and (B) the Knower. Presuppositions, we should keep in mind, are immune to arguments in favor or against a proposition. So, whether one accepts or rejects the proposition that A can only be known by B, the ontological status of A and B remain unquestioned. It is these presuppositions that I find most troubling and in need of qualifications before going to my third counter argument.

The presupposition B, The Knower, abstracts a prototype from all the people who, for whatever reasons, are said to know or to act knowledgeably. This not only celebrates the abstract individualism of the dying psychology of the
West, it also contradicts all we know of communication as a joint accomplishment. Abstractions know nothing. People do. To recover the diversity of the voices we should be concerned with in communication, I am suggesting that we refer to knowers in the plural, without assuming that all knowers know in the same way and the same things.

The presupposition A, Knowledge about Communication, is doubly problematic. It takes knowledge and communication as two separate entities, and the former as being representative of the latter. I can not support this dualism. I thought it was dead since Wittgenstein abandoned his picture theory of language. The rise of dialogism in literature, social constructionism in psychology, cultural studies of the media, feminist criticisms of representations, and more generally the linguistic turn philosophy has taken since, has shown this representationalism to be an untenable approach to understanding knowledge. Why going back to an archaic past?

To argue against the proposition by implying that knowledge about communication is superior to the kind of knowledge knowers of communication know to enact is to privilege writing at the expense of lived or embodied experiences, to privilege objective (third-person) accounts of people as opposed to self-referential (first-person) accounts of people, and to privilege institutionalized knowledge practices in place of personal forms. Here then, I have to argue within epistemology, a philosophical discipline concerned with how we come to know.

Michael Polyani acknowledges both explicit and tacit personal knowledge as knowledge. Even Chomsky is comfortable granting competent speakers of a language the status of knowers of their language without requiring or expecting their ability to cite the rules by which he says they speak. Those who argue against the proposition by claiming that the speakers of a language - to continue the example - do not know the language they are speaking the way linguists prefer to describe it, is to ignore that there are many ways of knowing, not one. Linguists do not know more about language than competent speakers do. They only know differently and in fact their knowledge usually is impoverished by the requirements of generalization, writing conventions, and objectivity.

Communication scholars, too, merely know differently. Arguing against the proposition on grounds that scientific knowledge is the only kind that counts fails to acknowledge that human communication too is a knowledge driven practice, a (re)enactment of what people (knowers) (already) know of each other and learning from each other in communication. Dismissing these kinds of knowing may be valid by reference to “communication” between machines but not by reference to processes of human communication whose constituents have the capacity of coming to know much as scientific observers do. Standards of knowledge do not exist without claiming them as such.

Take our debate as an example. No matter what our opponents say, they cannot possibly debate and at the same time deny that their arguing had nothing to do with the truth or falsity of the proposition that will survive the process. Their very participation in the debate demonstrates that even knowledge about communication is decided in communication. One kind can hardly be privileged at the expense of the other kind.

(4) Excluding themselves from the proposition, playing God.

The epistemological trick that I am expecting our opponents will try to perform is to exclude themselves from participating in the phenomenon they study, from having any part (or position) in what they know, in effect, to play God.

Heinz von Foerster once remarked that “objectivity is the illusion that reality could be observed without an observer.” Hillary Putnam characterizes objectivity as taking a “God’s eye” view of the world. For me, it means absolving oneself of all responsibilities knowledge entails, particularly to those affected by this knowledge. I contend that it is not merely illusionary but unconsolable to privilege positionless knowledge about human communication over the kind of positioned knowledge communicators actually enact in producing the process. If communication is, at least in part, a knowledge driven process, then the knowledge driving it must be respected. This also applies to the - in my opinion - equally positional knowledge that drives communication scholars to make their observations or experiments. Only from a “God’s eye” view on communication, from a view that claims to be
infallible, unquestionable, direct, and perfect, could one be led to claim that there is knowledge about
communication unknown to (all) knowers (other than oneself). I submit this to be an untenable position for humans
to take - at least in a democratic society as ours - and I am restraining myself to comment on those who favor this
position.

All of these arguments against the proposition, albeit only anticipated, have to be rejected. Unless our opponents
come up with something compelling, I urge the judges and this audience to accept that knowledge always is
embodied, that knowledge of communication resides not in any one individual’s head but in the dialogical
practices of knowledgeable communicators, and that (scientific) observers of communication must be held
responsible for how they come to know.

Knowledgeability is not the prerogative of scientists playing gods, nor should it be confused with monological
accounts of an observerless (i.e. objective) world (ontology). Communication is inherently dialogical and can not
be understood by privileging any one participant’s (The Knower’s) judgment on what counts as knowledge for
everyone else.

Afterthoughts

While our opponents’ arguments drifted into all kinds of areas, far beyond what they had committed to debate,
when they did address the proposition, they argued rather predictably:

Regarding (2), they did not merely “smuggle” an ontological metaphor into the debate, they never even examined
their belief in an ontology beyond experiences, repeating the traditional objections realists have raised against so-
called relativists, and addressing none of the epistemological issues of how they as knowers come to know what
they were talking of. In fact, humans had no place in their conception of knowledge.

Regarding (3), they acknowledged different kinds of knowledge but then privileged scientific knowledge as the
only reliable and valid kind, staying entirely within the explicit, written, disembodied, objective, and monological
tradition (of privileging superior observers’ accounts of third-person others), that is unable to address embodied
and dialogical ways of knowing which I consider central to understanding human communication. It is not
surprising that in the accounts they privilege, other humans look very much like machines and quite unlike the
opponents of the proposition who considered themselves capable of arguing in the knowledge of their audience’s
knowledge.

Regarding (4), they declined responsibilities for the knowledge they create by deferring to institutionalized
methods, to scientific procedures, to codes - as if these methods worked without humans and without having to
make sense to researchers that engage them. By arguing for objective (non-knower centered and positionless)
criteria for knowledge, they, in effect, removed themselves from the proposition and disclaimed any responsibility
to others for the knowledge they generate. They demonstrated living in the illusion that “reality could be observed
without an observer,” that institutional practices could create valid knowledge without anyone’s informed
participation.

In an unexpected move, the opponents of the proposition suggested that objective knowledge is egalitarian and
democratic because everyone can learn to apply scientific methods - as if democracy would be assured by the
enlightenment ideal of rationality, of standardizing everyone to know alike and reason the same way. On the
contrary, I maintain that democracy requires acknowledging different ways of being, communicating in the
awareness of and respect for others’ knowing, realizing that knowledge is constructed and reconstructable in
communication, and, hence, demonstrable only by involving the constituents of the communication phenomena
attended to. If anyone is elitist and sectarian it is those who accept their own way of knowing as the only valid
kind for everyone else.
Finally regarding (1), the opponents of the proposition demonstrated (at least to me) that inconsistencies in their epistemology allowed them to argue everything and to solve nothing. Without seeing themselves, without acknowledging their own languaging in the process of communication, they drifted into many abstract irrelevancies.

In trying to win the debate, we prevented each other from advancing understanding of our own humanity.