

# Knowing, Knowing Perspicuously, and Knowing How One Knows

Guy Longworth<sup>1</sup>  
University of Warwick  
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Abstract: In *Knowing and Seeing*, Michael Ayers presents a view of what he calls *primary knowledge* according to which one who knows in that way both knows perspicuously and knows how they know. I use some general considerations about seeing, knowing, and knowing how one knows in order to raise some questions about this view. More specifically, I consider some putative limits on one's capacity to know how one knows. The main question I pursue concern whether perspicuity should be thought of either (i) as a condition of sensory experience, (ii) as a condition of sense-based cognition, or (iii) as an interface condition, involving interrelations between sensory experience and sense-based cognition.

Key words: Ayers; knowledge; perception; consciousness

## **i. Introduction.**

A central theme in Michael Ayers' fertile and insightful book is the importance to our epistemic lives—indeed, to our so much as *having* epistemic lives—of what he calls *primary knowledge*. Primary knowledge, as Ayers conceives of it, is knowledge that is, or that has a source that is, distinctively *perspicuous*. That is, it is

...knowledge gained by being evidently, self-consciously, in direct cognitive contact with the object of knowledge. (63. All unattributed references are to Ayers 2019.)

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In more detail, and focusing specifically on cases of primary perceptual knowledge,

not only are possessors of [primary] perceptual knowledge so suitably related to the object of their knowledge as to have that knowledge, they perceive themselves as so related, and know that they are so related as surely and in the same way, through the very same perceptual experiences, as they have any perceptual knowledge at all of their environment. Conscious perceptual knowledge is such that those that have it not only have perceptual knowledge of their environment, but also perceptual knowledge that and of how they have that knowledge. They have that logically second-order knowledge without second-order reflection. (63)

So, primary knowledge, as Ayers understands it, seems to be subject to a form of KK-condition, a condition to the effect that someone who knows, in the primary sense, that  $p$ , knows, or perhaps is in a position to know, that (and how) they know that  $p$ .

One claim about primary knowledge that Ayers seeks to defend is simply that we have some of it. A second claim is that if we didn't have some of it, then we wouldn't have any knowledge at all. A third claim is that the reason why we would lack any knowledge if we lacked primary knowledge is not that our knowledge is exhaustively primary. So, insofar as Ayers endorses a form of KK-condition, he doesn't think a strong form applies ubiquitously. Ayers allows that there can be cases of what he calls *secondary knowledge*—that is, cases of knowledge that are not, in his sense, cases of primary knowledge. Those can include cases in which one knows that  $p$  without being in a position to know that (and how) one knows that  $p$ . Rather, the reason why we would lack knowledge if we lacked primary knowledge is that our having secondary knowledge is dependent on our having primary knowledge. That is what I meant by suggesting that Ayers holds that having an epistemic life at all depends upon having some primary knowledge.

I begin, in §2, by briefly characterizing the aspect of Ayers position on which I focus and setting out my questions about that position. In §3 and §4, I say more about why I think those questions are worth addressing, via discussing some distinctions between sense-perception and knowledge, and between, on one hand, sense-perception and knowledge, and on the other hand, knowledge of sense-perception and knowledge of knowledge. In §5, I consider some ways in which Ayers might consider short-circuiting my questions before concluding in §6.

## **2. Primary and secondary knowledge.**

Why does Ayers hold that we have knowledge at all only because we have some primary knowledge? One sort of consideration is sketched in the following passage:

So why couldn't some subject have only secondary knowledge—that is, with no ordinarily conscious perceptual knowledge at all, but nevertheless with knowledge of its environment? Let us suppose that the cognitive connection with their environment necessary for any subjects to have knowledge of it and of their own action (if it can be called action) within it, is entirely through secondary perception such as blindsight or subliminal perception, but total. Suppose that such unconscious sensory input gave rise in them to a kind of ongoing, coherent, more or less comprehensive grand Hunch about their environment, confident and true. One might first ask how such a Hunch could have any empirical content, and what would or could it be like to be an animal that did not have perceptual consciousness, but nevertheless had thoughts about the world. Perhaps these problems are sufficiently mitigated if it is supposed that the subject once perceived things normally, but in any case the subject would be unable ever to check, even if they once could, whether or how far the current Hunch is correct, whether their actions are appropriate, or whether they were in fact doing what they believed they were doing. There would be no direct cognitive contact with the world, a kind of sceptical nightmare. (68)

As well as indicating some of Ayers' grounds for holding that knowledge is dependent on primary knowledge, the passage tells us something about how Ayers understands the distinction between cases of primary and secondary knowledge. Secondary knowledge, unlike primary knowledge, is knowledge that can be based on unconscious sensory input, of a sort exemplified in cases of blindsight or subliminal perception. It is because we couldn't have knowledge if our only sources were in that sense unconscious that we couldn't have knowledge without primary knowledge.

My most general question for Ayers arises here. What precisely is the reason why unconscious sources can't sustain knowledge in the absence of conscious sources? Specifically, is this because a creature with only unconscious sources would not know that, or how, they know? That would be to claim, first, that knowing, in the primary sense, that  $p$  depends on knowing that, and

how, one knows that  $p$ . And it would be to claim, second, that one couldn't know anything unless there were some cases in which one also knew that, and how, one knew. Alternatively, is the reason why unconscious sources can't sustain knowledge in the absence of conscious sources that knowing is possible only for someone who knows some things on the basis of conscious sources, whether or not they exploit the consciousness of those sources in order to know that, or how, they know? That would be to claim, first, that knowing, in the primary sense, that  $p$  depends on basing that knowledge on sources that are distinctively conscious. It might be to claim, in addition, that the required sources are conscious in the sense that one privy to those sources would sometimes (or, perhaps, typically, or normally, or always) be in a position to know that, and how, they know. And it would be to claim, second, that one couldn't know anything unless there were some cases in which one knew on the basis of such conscious sources.

This general question concerns precisely how we should understand the KK-principle that Ayers seeks to impose on primary knowledge. We can usefully divide the first question into the following sub-questions:

- Q1. If someone has primary knowledge that  $p$ , does it follow that they know that, and how, they know that  $p$ ?
- Q2. If someone has primary knowledge that  $p$ , does it follow that their knowledge is based on a conscious source?
- Q3. If someone has knowledge that is based on a conscious source, does it follow that they are in a position to know that, and how, they know, whether or not they exploit their being in that position in order to know that, and how, they know?
- Q4. If someone has knowledge that is based on a conscious source, does it follow that their consciousness of their source is related, at least indirectly, to its capacity to put someone in a position to know that, and how, they know—for example, by being such as to sometimes, or usually, or normally put those who know on its basis in a position to know that, and how, they know?

Let me say more about why I think that these questions matter.

### **3. Experience, knowledge, and knowledge of knowledge.**

On one natural view, states or episodes of sensory perception and states of knowledge are quite different sorts of achievements. On

one version of this view, states of knowledge are cognitive in a way that states or episodes of sensory perception are not. Crudely, states or episodes of sensory perception are relations to concrete features of an environment. One is either in such relations or not; there is no such thing as being erroneously in such relations. By contrast, states of knowledge are cognitive in at least the following minimal sense: they embody commitments to things being a particular way or ways. They are thus the upshot of exercises of one or more capacities to undertake such commitments. Since one can undertake commitments to things being a particular way or ways even when things are not that way or those ways, there is such a thing as erroneously undertaking such commitments. From the perspective of this version of the view, what is special about knowledge, by contrast with other cognitive states, has to do, first, with the fact that the specific forms of commitment that it embodies are not, and perhaps cannot be, erroneous. And it has to do, second, with the specific kinds of explanations why specific forms of commitment are not, and perhaps cannot be, erroneous that are required to hold in order for those commitments to be embodied in knowledge. The required explanations have to do with the ways in which the commitments are initiated, in response to specific types of sources, including sense-perceptual sources, and then preserved over time, for example in memory. (Ayers doesn't share precisely these views about sense-perception or knowledge. However, most differences between this view and his will not matter for present expositional purposes. Differences that might matter are discussed later.)

Differences between knowledge and sense perception show up in some of the ways in which it is possible to know things without sense-perception, and also in some of the ways in which it is possible to have sense-perception without knowing things. For an example of the first sort, one can know that there is a plane overhead even when one is no longer in sense-perceptual contact with the plane—for example, when it has slipped behind a cloud, or when one has looked away. For an example of the second sort, one might enjoy sense-perception of an orange even though one thought that one was hallucinating and, on that basis, withheld what might otherwise have been a knowledge-embodied commitment to there being an orange presented to one. (See here also Ayers: 80.)

More delicately, such differences are reflected by differences in the modal behaviours of sense-perception and knowledge. (For relevant further discussion, see Soteriou 2016, 117–153.) Since sense-perception is a relation to environmental features, it is simply impossible to enjoy it in the absence of those features. One could, of course, suffer an hallucination that one was unable to discriminate from a case of sense-perception. However, the fact

that one could have suffered such an hallucination seems irrelevant to the question whether or not one now stands in sense-perceptual relations to an environment. And one might even continue to enjoy sense-perceptual contact with one's environment in the face of significant danger that one's sense-perceptual experience might be replaced by hallucinatory ringers, just as long as that danger didn't come to pass.

Something similar is true of knowledge, in that it is simply impossible to know that  $p$  when it is not the case that  $p$ . However, knowledge, unlike sense-perception, embodies commitments of a sort that *can* be undertaken in a way that is independent of fact. (More carefully, we might want to leave open that the specific forms of commitment embodied in knowing are distinct from any commitments embodied in other kinds of state, including states of opining, or believing, or taking it for granted. In that case, the claim would be that appropriately similar commitments to those that are embodied in knowing can be undertaken in ways that are independent of fact.) For example, I currently know that my car is parked at home. That knowledge embodies a commitment that my car is parked at home. If the car were stolen and moved, I would no longer know that my car is parked at home. However, in that circumstance I could easily retain a commitment to the effect that my car is parked at home. It is fairly widely agreed that although the commitments that are embodied by knowledge must be correct in order for one to know, their mere correctness is insufficient. In addition, they must be appropriately responsive to whether or not the target fact obtains. One reasonable approximation to the required form of appropriate responsiveness would be a *safety condition* to the effect that one knows that  $p$  only if one would not too easily have the commitment that  $p$  that one in fact has while it was not the case that  $p$ . (As an aside, it seems to follow that, in the case in which my car was stolen and moved, my loss of knowledge occurred prior to the theft. My commitment to the effect that my car was at home was safe only as long as the car couldn't easily have been moved without my shedding the commitment. It is plausible that my commitment met that condition only until around the time that the thief began casing the joint.)

One way of thinking about the different modal behaviours of sense-perception and knowledge is as follows. If a state of awareness of features of an environment, or of facts, were constituted by modes of representing the features or facts such that appropriately similar modes of representing could be enjoyed even in the absence of the features or facts, then the constituting modes will be subject to a substantive safety condition. Thus, since knowing constitutes a commitment, itself a mode of representing facts, where

appropriately similar modes of commitment, and so of representing facts, could be enjoyed even if the facts did not obtain, one knows only if one's commitment meets a safety condition. In order to know, there must not be too much danger of one erroneously so committing (or committing in appropriately similar ways).

By contrast, since sense-perception of environmental features is not constituted by any such mode of representing those features, one's sensorily perceiving features of an environment is not subject to such a condition. There is no danger at all of one's sensorily perceiving a feature of one's environment in the absence of that feature. Furthermore, there is no mode of representation embodied in one's sensorily perceiving features of one's environment. Hence, even if we were to allow that matching hallucinations do embody modes of representing environmental features, they will not be modes of representing environmental features that are appropriately similar to any mode of representation embodied in a case of sense-perception. And so, cases of sense-perception and cases of matching hallucinations are not related in a way that would trigger the imposition of a substantive safety condition.

It might be helpful at this point to consider the application of some of these ideas to a standard example. Suppose that unbeknownst to one, one were in barn façade country. Before one is a barn, but it is surrounded by mere façades that one would not be able to tell apart from barns. One is looking at a barn, but it is plausible that one could very easily have been looking at a façade instead. Plausibly, the surrounding façades make no difference to whether or not one is seeing a barn. Plausibly, despite the significant danger that one might not have been looking at a barn, one sees the barn, a feature of one's environment. Now suppose that on the basis of how things seem to one perceptually, one undertakes a commitment to the effect that there is a barn there. The commitment is correct: what is there is a barn. However, there is a significant danger that one would have undertaken an appropriately similar commitment whilst looking at a façade, rather than a barn. That is, there is a significant danger of one's undertaking a very similar commitment erroneously. In light of that significant danger of committing erroneously, it is plausible that one therefore fails to know that there is a barn there.

Now consider a similar case. Suppose that one were the subject of a future neuroscientific experiment involving the induction of hallucination. The experiment begins with one sitting before an orange. Looking before oneself, one clearly sees the orange. Now, the neuroscientist turns on his machine and, unbeknownst to one, one stops seeing the orange and begins instead to hallucinate a matching scene. During this period, the neuroscientist removes the

orange. This situation continues for five minutes, with a momentary break at two and a half minutes, during which the neuroscientist briefly both returns the orange to its original position and pauses the machine. It seems plausible that despite the surrounding hallucinations, one nonetheless sees the orange during one's half-time respite. Is one able to know, during that break in the ongoing induction of hallucination, that there is an orange before one? Plausibly not, due to the significant danger of committing erroneously.

A further question arises with respect to this second case. Can one know, during the half-time break from hallucination, that one's experience is that of seeing an orange, as opposed to seeing something else or merely hallucinating? On the assumption that it is a general feature of knowledge that it is subject to a safety condition, it seems that one cannot. For one would have committed to one's experience being that of seeing an orange in the closely similar cases in which one was merely hallucinating, and so not seeing an orange. Since one could very easily have committed erroneously to one's seeing an orange, the safety condition on knowing rules that even when one commits correctly, one fails to know that one is seeing an orange. For all that, it is plausible that one was in fact enjoying the experience of seeing an orange. And it is plausible, moreover, that that experience was conscious.

If that is right, then we will need to distinguish an experience's being conscious from its being such that its subject is in a position to know that they are enjoying an experience of that type. And having distinguished one's enjoying a conscious experience from one's knowing what type of experience one is enjoying, we would have reason to consider what array of answers should be given to our opening set of questions. Perhaps, for example, primary knowing depends on having experience that is conscious but does not depend on being in a position to know what type of experience one is having. On the assumption that knowing how one knows depends on knowing that the source of one's knowing is of a type supportive of knowing—for example, that it is a case of seeing, rather than a case of hallucination—that would be a view on which one can know on the basis of conscious experience without being in a position to know how one knows. In that case, the way would be open to considering the view that primary knowing depends on conscious experience but not on knowing how one knows.

Although reflection on the hallucination example suggests the bare possibility of such a view, nothing said to this point would support its endorsement. The hallucination case we considered is one in which it is plausible that one sees without being in a position to know that one sees; but it is also a case in which one cannot know

how things are in one's environment on the basis of seeing one's environment. So, it is not a case in which one knows on the basis of conscious experience without knowing how one knows. However, reflection on the hallucination case does indicate an apparent gap in Ayers' case for the primary knowledge requirement, when construed as a requirement that there be cases of knowledge in which one knows that and how one knows. Ayers' case, recall, depended on the idea that the sorts of cases that would fail the condition would be cases of knowledge based only on *unconscious* sensory input. The distinction between one's having an experience that is conscious and one's being in a position to know what type of experience one was having, opens the possibility that there might be cases in which knowledge that is not primary, in the sense of making available to its subject knowledge of how they know, is nonetheless primary in the sense of being based on conscious experience. The distinctive modal requirements on knowledge give rise to the possibility of gaps in one's knowledge that are explained, not by the absence of consciousness, but rather by limits on one's abilities to discriminate different types of experiences. The possibility of such gaps gives rise, in turn, to the possibility that one might have fully conscious experience without being in a position to know what that experience is like. If it were possible to know on the basis of conscious experiences that fell into such gaps, then it might be possible to know in a way that avoided Ayers' case and yet in which, since one was not in a position to know how one knew, one lacked one sort of primary knowledge.

#### **4. Knowing and knowing how one knows.**

As indicated, no positive case has yet been made in favour of the possibility that someone might know on the basis of conscious experience without being in a position to know how they know. The hallucination case that we just considered was one in which lapses in knowledge of one's experience are tracked by lapses in knowledge of one's environment. Can there be cases in which it is plausible that knowledge is based on conscious experience of one's environment, but in which one isn't in a position to know what type of experience one is enjoying, and so in which one isn't in a position to know how one knows?

I think that there can be such cases. One plausible case—albeit one that is slightly delicate to evaluate—is provided by a minor revision to the hallucination case. In order to make it so that the subject of that case might easily have committed erroneously to there being an orange before them, we had the neuroscientist

remove the orange while the subject was hallucinating. Suppose that the neuroscientist had left the orange in place. In that case, we might be willing to allow that there was little danger of the subject's committing erroneously during their momentary relief from hallucination. We might therefore be willing to allow that they could know during that period of relief that there was an orange before them on the basis of their seeing the orange. (This judgment is delicate in part because it is not straightforward that the subject in that case knows that there is an orange before them on the basis of seeing it in the interval between hallucinations, rather than on the basis of preserving knowledge of its location on the basis having seen it earlier, before the hallucinations were induced. (Compare my current knowledge that my car is parked at home.) Here, we might consider instead a case in which it has been too long since the originating experience for the subject to have retained their initial knowledge of the orange's location without intervening nourishment from contemporary experience.) Still, the same considerations apply to their commitment to their having seen the orange during that period: all too easily, they might have had that commitment while failing to see the orange, and so there is a significant danger of their carrying that commitment erroneously. If that is right, then we have a case in which someone knows that there is an orange before them on the basis of conscious experience without their being in a position to know how they know.

Here is another sort of case with a similar structure. Jill is fluent in spoken English and in lipreading. Now suppose that she is attending both to the sound and the dynamic shape of Bill's speech. On that basis, she comes to know that he has said that the orange is ripe. Now suppose that although Jill is in a position to experience both the sound and the dynamic shape of Bill's speech, her attention is so distributed that the cause of her knowledge of what Bill said is the sound, rather than the dynamic shape, and so goes via her capacity to understand spoken English, rather than via her lipreading ability. However, it could very easily have been the case that her attention was distributed slightly differently, and in that case the cause of her knowledge would have been the dynamic shape of Bill's speech, rather than its sound. It is plausible that there are cases of that sort in which Jill commits correctly to having come to know on the basis of hearing, but in which she could very easily have been wrong about that. For Jill's ability to discriminate amongst her experiential sources is limited. That is, her ability to tell that her knowledge was brought about through attending to speech rather than shape is limited. And in that case, it is plausible that Jill didn't then know that she knew by hearing, rather than by sight. There was too much of a danger of her committing erroneously to having

known by hearing—as in those nearby cases, indiscriminable by Jill from her actual case, in which she instead knows by sight. Since Jill is not in a position to know what type of experience was in fact responsible for her knowing, she is not in a position to know how she knew. Nonetheless, it is plausible that Jill did know what Bill said. After all, the nearby cases in which she undertakes a commitment about what Bill said on the basis of sight rather than hearing are still cases with respect to which there is little danger of her committing erroneously. And it is plausible, moreover, that she came to know on the basis of conscious experience of Bill's speech. For the nearby possibility that threatens her knowledge of how she knows is a possibility in which she commits to Bill's having said that the orange is ripe on a slightly different basis, but for all that commits correctly.

If that is right, then there appear to be cases in which someone knows on the basis of conscious experience, but without their being in a position to know how they know. Suppose it is right. What would be the consequences for Ayers' position?

The main consequence, as already suggested, is that the possibility of such cases would press upon Ayers' position the question how precisely his notion of perspicuity is to be understood. If it is to be understood by appeal to knowledge how one knows, then the cases we've considered would not be counted as cases of primary knowledge. However, they would seem to be cases in which knowledge is based on conscious experience, rather than on unconscious sensory input. They therefore indicate an apparent need for Ayers to say more in defence of the primary knowledge requirement. Alternatively, Ayers might opt instead to endorse only a weaker connection between perspicuity and knowledge of how one knows, and so a weaker connection between primary knowledge and knowledge of how one knows.

One thought here would be that although someone who knows on the basis of conscious experience need not know exactly how they know (to know, for example, that they know via seeing), still they will at least be in a position to know that they know via sense perception, broadly construed. One concern about this thought is that it requires of subjects something quite sophisticated, that they possess, and can apply directly, an appropriately broad conception of sense perception. A second concern is that knowledge that one knows something on the basis of sense perception might seem too thin an achievement to mark primary knowledge off as a distinctive kind. After all, it is something one plausibly might know about one's secondary knowledge of ephemeral affairs.

An alternative thought would be that primary knowledge is knowledge that is based on conscious experience without any direct

dependence on knowledge of how one knows. Since conscious experience is typically or normally knowable, one who knows on the basis of conscious experience will typically or normally be in a position to know how they know, but the conscious experience requirement and the knowing how one knows requirement nonetheless come apart. That would seem to leave intact Ayers' defence of a form of the primary knowledge requirement, construed as requirement for conscious experience, but would open further questions about how the relations between consciousness and knowledge of type of experience should be understood.

## **5. Sense-perception and knowledge.**

The discussion of cases to this point has been framed by some assumed differences between knowledge and sense-perception, and in particular by assumptions about the different modal requirements to which knowledge and perception are subject. Crudely, sense-perception of an environment can withstand the near possibility of matching hallucination, whilst knowledge cannot always withstand the near possibility of matching commitment. A further line of response that is open to Ayers would be to challenge those assumed differences between sense-perception and knowledge.

One way of doing so would be to adopt a view of sense-perception on which it embodies an analogue of commitments to one's environment being a particular way or ways. That sort of view might plausibly give rise to a safety condition on genuine cases of sensory perception—for example, cases of seeing rather than hallucinating. The idea would be that adopting that sort of position has as a consequence that the subject of the hallucination case does not even see the orange during their momentary relief from hallucination. And Jill's view about what Bill said isn't based on her hearing Bill's utterance, due to the nearby possibility of her experience embodying an erroneous commitment to the presence of auditory, as opposed to visual, features of his utterance.

Another way of challenging the differences that I've assumed between sense-perception and knowledge would be to adopt a view of knowledge on which it does not embody a commitment to things being a particular way or ways. Rather, knowledge is viewed as a relation to environmental features or facts, as on the relational model of perception that was sketched above. On this view, knowledge is not subject to a distinctive form of safety condition. The idea would be that adopting this sort of position has as a consequence that the subject of the hallucination case can in fact

know, during their relief from hallucination, both that there is an orange and that they are seeing it. Similarly, the idea would be that Jill can know that she heard Bill's utterance.

My own view is that setting aside the ways in which a relation to facts is liable to depend on commitment, reflection on the cases that I've sketched suggests that neither of those options is really plausible. The more natural view is that there can be subjects who enjoy conscious sense-perception of an environment but do not know, and that that fact is connected with the sorts of modal differences between sense-perception and knowledge that were sketched earlier. However, I think that there is room for further reflection on precisely how we should understand the modal behaviours of sense perception and knowledge. And it may be that that reflection will ultimately overturn those judgments.

## **6. Perspicuity again.**

To summarise, I began by raising the following questions about primary knowledge, as Ayers' understands it:

- Q1. If someone has primary knowledge that  $p$ , does it follow that they know that, and how, they know that  $p$ ?
- Q2. If someone has primary knowledge that  $p$ , does it follow that their knowledge is based on a conscious source?
- Q3. If someone has knowledge that is based on a conscious source, does it follow that they are in a position to know that, and how, they know, whether or not they exploit their being in that position in order to know that, and how, they know?
- Q4. If someone has knowledge that is based on a conscious source, does it follow that the consciousness of their source is related at least indirectly to its capacity to put someone in a position to know that, and how, they know—for example, by being such as to sometimes, or usually, or normally put those who know on its basis in a position to know that, and how, they know?

I've suggested that, given Ayers' case for the primary knowledge requirement, together with the possibility of enjoying conscious experience without being in a position to know what type of conscious experience one is enjoying, there is room to consider negative answers to Q1 and Q3. I've suggested, further, that that leaves open that we might answer Q2, and perhaps also Q4, affirmatively. My aim has been to provoke Ayers into saying a little

more about how he sees the relations between primary knowing, perspicuity, consciousness, and knowing how one knows.

### **References.**

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