

**THE POSSIBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE: REPLY TO DENIS BUEHLER,
DANIEL DOHRN, DAVID LÜTHI, BERNARD RITTER AND SIMON SAUTER**

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I thank Denis Bühler, Daniel Dohrn, Daniel Lüthi, Bernhard Ritter and Simon Sauter for their responses. They are all, to varying degrees, sceptical about the central ideas of my book. I will not try to address all their objections here but will focus instead on three major areas of concern: (1) the clarity and applicability of the multi-levels model, (2) my account of means of knowing, and (3) my discussion of transcendental arguments.

1. The Multi-Levels Model

To be more precise, they worry that the multi-levels model is less illuminating than I suppose (Buehler, Dohrn, Lüthi, Sauter), that my account of means of knowing is not adequate (Buehler, Dohrn), and that I underestimate what transcendental arguments can achieve (Dohrn, Lüthi, Ritter). I am unpersuaded by their arguments in relation to (1) and (3) but agree that more needs to be said about means of knowing. In this section I will defend the multi-levels model. In the next section I will flesh out the notion of a means of knowing. Finally, I will take another look at transcendental arguments.

Here are three specific concerns about the multi-levels models:

- (a) One or other of the first two levels of a multi-levels response to an epistemological how possible question is superfluous.
- (b) There isn't a clear distinction between Level 1 and Level 2.
- (c) The model doesn't apply smoothly to some of the actual how-possible questions that I discuss in the book.

Starting with (a), Dohrn writes that 'the question is why level 1 questions must be answered at all' (p. 7). His point is that if how-possible questions are obstacle-dependent then surely all we need to do in order to answer the question is to tackle the obstacle. This is something that happens at Level 2 rather than Level 1 so why is Level 1 necessary at all? One reason is that the obstacles that get tackled at Level 2 are precisely obstacles to the acquisition of knowledge by the means identified at Level 1.

In this sense, Level 2 presupposes Level 1. For example, consider the claim that it is possible for us to perceive what we do without thereby knowing something about the world around us. This is supposed to represent an obstacle to the acquisition of knowledge of the external world by means of the senses but it is only a significant obstacle to our knowing anything about the world around us on the assumption that perceiving *is*, for us, a means of knowing about the world around us. In general, if M has not been singled out at Level 1 as a means by which we know things there would be little point in our trying to demonstrate that there are no insuperable obstacles to the acquisition of knowledge by M.

A different way of developing (a) is to argue that it is Level 2 rather than Level 1 that is superfluous. As Dohrn puts it:

If how-possible questions are not devoted to removing salient obstacles but to exhibiting means to acquire a certain knowledge, the function of level 2 becomes dubious. Should we have an interest in obstacles as such or merely with regard to completing the exploration of means? In the latter case, why is this obstacle incomplete unless obstacles are tackled? (p. 29)

In my view, how-possible questions *are* obstacle-dependent and *do* therefore call for the removal of salient obstacles. Still, Dohrn asks a reasonable question. Consider a position that might be called *extreme minimalism*.¹¹¹ The extreme minimalist argues that explaining how knowledge of kind K is possible is simply a matter of identifying means M by which it is possible. On this account, tackling obstacles to the acquisition of K by M is, like the project of identifying enabling conditions for acquiring K by M, an optional extra. We can, if we like, engage with specific obstacles as and when they arise but a need for obstacle-removal is not built in to the very idea of answering an epistemological how-possible question. In these terms, Dohrn's question is: what is wrong with extreme minimalism?

¹¹¹ Timothy Williamson endorsed this approach in written comments on a draft of chapter 1 of *The Possibility of Knowledge*.

What is wrong with it is that if epistemological how-possible questions are obstacle-generated then Level 2 cannot be an optional extra. That is, if the question we are trying to answer is ‘How is X possible given the various factors that make it look impossible?’ a philosophically satisfying and relevant answer cannot ignore the factors that make X look impossible. Even if there are no genuine obstacles to the acquisition of K by M, *showing* that this is so still counts as an exercise in obstacle-removal. Perhaps, in that case, what the extreme minimalist is questioning is the thesis of obstacle-dependence itself. However, this thesis is correct. Consider the difference between the following challenges:

(5) How do you know that P?

(6) How is it possible for you to know that P?

The first of these questions can be asked pointedly, with the implication that perhaps you don’t know. It can also be asked out of what Austin calls ‘respectful curiosity’ (1979: 78). If I assert that P and someone asks me how I know that P this might simply be a request for information, with no implication that I don’t know that P. (II) is different from (I) precisely because it does imply an obstacle.¹¹² As McDowell points out, a good first step in responding to (II) would be to ask the questioner ‘Why exactly does it look to you, and why should it look to me, as if P is *not* possible?’¹¹³ It would be bizarre for the person who asked (II) to respond by saying ‘Well, I never suggested that it looks to me as if P is not possible’. In asking (II) rather than (I) one *is* implying that it looks as if P is not possible and that is why we need to take an interest in the factors that make P look impossible.

The discussion so far suggests that Levels 1 and 2 are interdependent. The obstacles that are the focus of Level 2 are obstacles to the acquisition of knowledge by Level 1 means of knowing, and the removal of these obstacles vindicates the supposition that the supposed means really are means of knowing. Does this mean that, as Sauter puts it, Levels 1 and 2 get ‘fused’ (p. 6) in the story that I tell? Yes, if this is

¹¹² William Dray made this point many years ago. See Dray (1957).

¹¹³ See McDowell (1998: 58).

simply a vivid way of making the point that the first two levels of the multi-levels model are interdependent. Does this interdependence have the effect of collapsing the distinction between Level 1 and Level 2? Sauter seems to think that it does, and this is the point of (b). A good way of assessing this charge is to take a closer look at the relation between Levels 1 and 2 of Kant's multi-levels response to the question 'How is synthetic *a priori* geometrical knowledge possible?'. As Lüthi points out, this is a question to which one would expect the multi-levels model to apply most straightforwardly but both he and Sauter argue that there are problems for the model even in relation to this question.

The specific problem that exercises both Sauter and Lüthi is this: if, as I claim, the obstacle to the existence of synthetic *a priori* knowledge that leads Kant to ask how such knowledge is possible is the problem of means, that is, the supposed absence of means of gaining such knowledge, then the identification of construction in pure intuition as a *bona fide* means of acquiring synthetic *a priori* geometrical knowledge is *itself* an exercise in obstacle-removal. This exercise in obstacle-removal takes place at Level 1 but in the multi-levels model obstacle-removal is supposed to be something that happens at Level 2 rather than at Level 1. If the identification of means of knowing is a form of obstacle-removal then nothing separates Levels 1 and 2. So what we have here is a concrete illustration of both (b) and (c).

Contrary to what this objection assumes I do not deny that what happens at Level 1 can have an obstacle-removing function. Indeed, Sauter quotes a passage from my book in which I make precisely this point in connection with Kant's account of geometry.¹¹⁴ In positing construction in intuition as a source of geometrical knowledge, Kant is tackling an obstacle to the existence of this kind of knowledge - the absence of means of acquiring it - but Kant's solution only works if construction in intuition really is a source of synthetic *a priori* knowledge. In drawing attention to the role of construction in geometry Kant is emphasizing the fact that geometrical proofs, as he understands them, are diagrammatic. Yet the particularity of the diagrams that figure in geometrical proofs represents an apparent obstacle to our acquiring *a priori* knowledge on the basis of such proofs. The reason is that *a priori* knowledge is, at least for Kant, a form of universal knowledge. The mathematician considers the universal in the

¹¹⁴ See Cassam (2007a: 12).

particular, and it is not clear how such a thing is possible. I call this the problem of universality and argue that this is problem that Kant is addressing at Level 2 of his account. So the distinction between the two levels of Kant's account is the distinction between positing means of acquiring geometrical knowledge and eliminating an obstacle to the acquisition of geometrical knowledge by the posited means.

Lüthi is doubtful about this way of proceeding because he doubts the reality of the problem of universality. He thinks that this is not an intuitive problem and that most of the real work in Kant's account is done by the identification of means of acquiring geometrical knowledge. This cannot be right. The main issue for Kant is not whether geometrical proof is diagrammatic – he thought that was obvious- but whether and how it is possible for the geometer to consider the universal in the particular. This is a problem that exercises Locke and Berkeley and also one that exercises Kant. He tries to solve it by giving an account of what makes it possible for us to consider the universal in the particular. What makes this possible, he argues in the Schematism, is the fact that construction in intuition is determined by certain universal conditions or rules of construction. These are the schemata of geometrical concepts. However, the schemata are not themselves *means* of knowing even if they guide the constructions by means of which we acquire geometrical knowledge. Kant's Level 2 response to the problem of universality is, to this extent, quite different from his Level 1 response to the problem of means, even though the problems are linked. The multi-levels analysis tries to do justice to these aspects of Kant's discussion, and I am not persuaded that there is much wrong with this analysis.

2. Means of Knowing

The next issue concerns the notion of a means of knowing. Both Dohrn and Buehler object that I fail to explain what counts as a means of knowing. Dohrn raises the possibility of our claiming to know without being in a position to specify means of knowing, and Ritter asks why the Kantian categories cannot be means of knowing. Each of these points merits a response so let me start by fleshing out my conception of means of knowing.

The example I give of a means of knowing is seeing that P. What makes seeing that P a means of knowing that P? Contrary to what I sometimes suggest in the book the

answer cannot be that means of knowing are means of *coming* to know.¹¹⁵ Remembering that P is a means of knowing that P but remembering that P is not, in normal circumstances, a means of coming to know that P. I know that I had eggs for breakfast but I did not come to know this by remembering that I had eggs for breakfast. Perhaps, in that case, it might be held that Φ -ing that P is a means of knowing that P if and only if 'S Φ s that P' entails 'S knows that P'. This allows seeing that P and remembering that P to come out as means of knowing that P but there are other reasons for not thinking of means of knowing in this way.¹¹⁶ For 'S knows that P' and 'S regrets that P' both entail 'S knows that P' but neither knowing that P nor regretting that P is a means of knowing that P.¹¹⁷ Why not? Because one cannot properly be said to know that P *by* knowing that P, or *by* regretting that P. So the fact that 'S Φ s that P' entails 'S knows that P' is not sufficient for Φ -ing that P to be a means of knowing that P. It isn't necessary either. Reading that P can be a means of knowing that P but 'S read that P' clearly does not entail 'S knows that P'. In addition, means of knowing needn't be propositional. Hearing the baby crying is a means of knowing that she is crying but it is not a relation to a proposition and so does not entail knowing.

What do seeing that P, remembering that P and reading that P have in common in virtue of which they all qualify as means of knowing? And what is it about knowing that P and regretting that P that makes it inappropriate to regard them as means of knowing? On an *explanatory* conception of means of knowing, which is the conception I endorse, Φ -ing that P is a means of knowing that P only if it is possible to explain how S knows that P by reference to the fact that S Φ s that P. So, for example, S's knowledge that it is raining can in principle be explained by reference to the fact that he can see that it is raining. If it is too dark for S to see anything then it is obviously not a good explanation of his knowledge to say that he can see that it is raining but if he *can* see that it is raining, or see the rain, that may well be how he knows. Similarly, my knowledge that I had eggs for breakfast is, in principle, explicable by reference to my remembering having had eggs for breakfast. Even if I regret having had eggs for

¹¹⁵ Timothy Williamson persuaded me of this.

¹¹⁶ This assumes that 'S sees that P' and 'S remembers that P' both entail 'S knows that P'. These entailments are, as Williamson points out, not uncontroversial. See Williamson (2000: 37) and Cassam (2007b) for more on this issue.

¹¹⁷ Unger (1975) defends the claim that 'S regrets that P' entails 'S knows that P'.

breakfast, and ‘S regrets that P’ entails that ‘S knows that P’, pointing out that I regret having had eggs for breakfast is, in most circumstances a very poor answer to ‘How do you know you had eggs for breakfast?’. An even worse answer would be ‘Because I know I did’.

The challenge is to understand why the fact that ‘S Φ s that P’ entails ‘S knows that P’ is neither sufficient nor necessary for Φ -ing that P to be a means of knowing that P. It is not sufficient because the fact that ‘S Φ s that P’ entails ‘S knows that P’ leaves it open that ‘By Φ -ing that P’ is a poor explanation of S’s knowing that P. It is not necessary because the fact that ‘S Φ s that P’ does *not* entail ‘S knows that P’ leaves it open that ‘By Φ -ing that P’ is a good explanation of S’s knowing that P. How do I know that Quine was born in Akron? I read it in his autobiography. This is a genuine explanation of my knowledge, even though there is no entailment here.

Now consider an example from Austin.¹¹⁸ S announces that there is a bittern at the bottom of his garden and we ask him how he knows. His answer is: ‘I was brought up in the Fens’. This might be a perfectly good answer to the question. Yet being brought up in the Fens is not a means of knowing that there is a bittern at the bottom of one’s garden. What this shows is that only some answers to the question ‘How do you know?’ pick out means of knowing. If Φ -ing that P is to be a means of knowing that P, then one can know that P *by* Φ -ing that P. S does not know that there is a bittern at the bottom of his garden *by* being brought up in the Fens, even if his having been brought up in the Fens is what put him in a position to know that what is at the bottom of his garden is indeed a bittern and not some other kind of bird.

This discussion has a bearing on Ritter’s interesting suggestion that the categories – concepts like *cause* and *substance* – can be regarded as means of knowing or pathways to knowledge. Suppose that the knowledge in question is my knowledge that the laptop on which I am writing these words is silver, and that I know that the laptop is dusty by seeing that it is silver. Let us agree, in addition, that categorial concepts are implicated in this form of seeing. To see that my laptop is dusty I need the concept *laptop* and possession of this concept depends upon a capacity for categorial thinking. While this would justify the claim that the categories have what Ritter calls an ‘experience-enabling function’, it would still not entitle one to regard them as *means by*

¹¹⁸ See Austin 1979.

which I know that my laptop is silver. I do not know that my laptop is silver, or anything else for that matter, *by* thinking categorially. Categorical thinking is an enabling condition for the acquisition of perceptual knowledge and not a means by which it is acquired. It puts one in a position to know that P by seeing that P, but it is seeing that P that is one's means of knowing in such cases.

If the explanatory conception of means of knowing is along the right lines what are we to make of the possibility of someone knowing that P without being in a position to specify his means of knowing? There is no need for the explanatory conception to deny that this is a genuine possibility. It can happen that I know that P without knowing how I know. It doesn't follow that in such cases there is no answer to the question 'How do you know?'. It only follows that the knower does not always know the answer and hence is not always in a position to *specify* his means of knowing. In Michael Ayers' terminology, knowledge in which the knower knows how he knows might be thought of as 'primary' but this is not to deny the existence of non-primary or secondary knowledge.¹¹⁹ Presumably, many non-human animals know things about their environment without knowing how they know.

It is one thing to think of means of knowing in explanatory terms. It is another thing to think that in every case in which S knows that P there must *be* an answer to the question 'How does S know?'. Why might one think that there must be an answer to this question? One idea is that knowledge is a cognitive achievement, a destination which S must have done something to reach.¹²⁰ If, in a case in which S does know that P, the question 'How does S know that P?' has no answer then this picture of knowledge will have to be abandoned. Self-knowledge is a case in point.¹²¹ Davidson claims that 'What sets knowledge of our own minds apart from other forms of knowledge is that there is no answer to the question how we know what we think' (2001: 163). If this is true then it follows that there aren't means by which we know our own minds. So, for example, I know what I am now thinking but there is nothing recognizable as the "means" by which I know what I am now thinking. However, while there is no doubt that this puts pressure on the idea that the concept of knowledge is the

¹¹⁹ See Ayers (1991: 140) for an account of the distinction between primary and secondary knowledge.

¹²⁰ See Boghossian (2008: 152) for further discussion of the idea that knowledge, or at least ordinary empirical knowledge, is a cognitive achievement.

¹²¹ I discuss self-knowledge in Cassam, forthcoming.

concept of a cognitive achievement it leaves intact the explanatory conception of means of knowing. This says that means of knowing are what we draw on to explain how someone knows *when an explanation is available*. It is a separate question whether an explanation *is* always available or whether, when one is available, the knower knows what it is.

Before moving on there is one more question about means of knowing that needs to be addressed. The explanatory conception says that Φ -ing that P is a means of knowing that P only if it is possible to explain how S knows that P by reference to the fact that S Φ s that P. What makes ‘By Φ -ing that P’ a good answer to ‘How does S know that P?’? One kind of minimalist says that no general account can be given of what makes an answer a good one, beyond saying that a good answer is simply one that we recognize as such. This is hard to accept. Take the proposition that the laptop on which I am writing these words is silver. I can know that it is silver by seeing that it is silver but not by hearing that it is silver (unless this means hearing from someone else that it is silver). To put it another way, ‘By seeing’ is a good answer to ‘How does he know that his laptop is silver?’. ‘By hearing’ is generally a bad answer. Minimalism takes this difference to be one that cannot be explained further but this cannot be right. There is an obvious explanation of the difference: the concept *silver* is one that can ordinarily be known to apply by visual means but not by auditory means. This suggests that what counts as a means of knowing that P or a good explanation of someone’s knowledge that P is fixed, at least in part, by reference to the concepts that figure in P.¹²²

It is a difficult question exactly how the conceptual content of P determines what counts as a means of knowing that P. A further complication is that knowledge can be transmitted and acquired by testimony. I know that my laptop is silver because I can see it but you know that it is silver because I just told you. Are these different ways of coming to know one and the same proposition on a par? A natural thought is that seeing that my laptop is silver is a *canonical* means of knowing that it is silver. Learning that it is silver as a result of my telling you is a *bona fide* means of knowing but not a canonical means of knowing. When it comes to the shape of my laptop, sight and touch

¹²² I owe this suggestion to Christopher Peacocke.

are both canonical means of knowing. Once again, it is the nature of the concepts that figure in the proposition known that fix what counts as a canonical means of knowing.

3. Transcendental Arguments

Suppose that a sceptically minded philosopher asks how knowledge of the external world is possible. Following McDowell's advice, we respond with a question of our own: 'Why exactly does it look to you, and why should it look to me, as if knowledge of the external world is *not* possible?' This is the answer we get: 'We humans get our knowledge of the world somehow from sense-perception but in order to know by perceptual means the truth of any proposition about the external world we first need to be able to eliminate the possibility that we are dreaming or being deceived by an evil demon. We cannot possibly eliminate these sceptical possibilities so it looks as though knowledge of the external world is not possible'.

Note that someone who argues in this way might be reluctant to conclude that they have no knowledge of the external world. They might believe that knowledge of the world *is* possible but they can't see *how* it is possible. It is no good responding to such a person by pointing out that, where P is some proposition about the external world, it is sometimes possible for us to know that P by seeing that P. Clearly, if it is possible for us to see that P then it is possible for us to know that P but what Stroud describes as the 'introduction of alternative, uneliminated possibilities' (2000b: 131) makes it look as though it isn't possible for us to see that P. The obstacle to knowing about the external world by perceptual means is, precisely, an obstacle to our ever being able to see that P, where P is a proposition about non-psychological reality.

On this account of the question 'How is knowledge of the external world possible?' there are two factors that make it look as though this kind of knowledge is not possible. To begin with, there is the idea that the elimination of the sceptic's alternative possibilities is a necessary condition for knowledge of the external world by means of the senses. Secondly, there is the claim that it is simply not possible for us to eliminate the sceptic's alternatives. This suggests two broad strategies for tackling the how-possible question:

- (A) Show that the supposed requirement on knowledge of the external world is not a genuine requirement.
- (B) Show that the supposed requirement on knowledge of the external world is one that it is possible for us to satisfy.

(A) is what I call an obstacle-dissipating response to the how-possible question. (B) is an obstacle-overcoming response. If either (A) or (B) can be made to work then we can claim to have explained how knowledge of the external world is possible.

Now compare a transcendental response to the how-possible question. There are two versions of such a response to be considered. One identifies certain *a priori* necessary conditions for knowledge of the external world. The other tries to show that knowledge of the external world is necessary for something else whose reality is not in question. I claim that neither type of response is to the point. Explaining what is necessary for knowledge of kind K does not explain how knowledge of kind K is possible. And showing that knowledge of kind K is necessary does not amount to explaining how it is possible. Suppose that, as Kant argues in his Refutation of Idealism, outer experience is necessary for inner experience, that is, for empirical self-knowledge. If we actually have inner experience it follows that we actually have outer experience but this does not explain how, given the factors that make it look impossible, outer experience is nonetheless possible. If we have outer experience then the supposed obstacles to its existence cannot be genuine but we still need to understand how they can be overcome or dissipated. And if we can overcome or dissipate the supposed obstacles to the existence of outer experience then there is no need for the transcendental argument of the Refutation.

The Refutation of Idealism is the focus of Ritter's comments. There is a great deal in his illuminating account of the Refutation with which I wholeheartedly agree. He rightly argues that Kant's point in the Refutation is not that we have inner experience and infer on this basis that there are outer objects. His point is rather that 'in order to comprehend one's intuitive representations as experiences in the first place one has to view them as causally dependent from external substances' (p. 13). As Ritter observes, this does not amount to a proof of the external world. From the fact that one has to *view* one's experiences as caused by external objects it does not follow that they *are* caused

by external objects. The mistaken idea that Kant is trying to combat is that our knowledge of the external world is acquired by reasoning from the premise that we have inner experience. Kant's idea is that consciousness of one's own existence is an *immediate* consciousness of things outside me. As Ritter puts it on Kant's behalf, 'there is no purely inner experience' and this means that 'there is no independent basis for a proof of the external world' (p 13). Furthermore, since the idealist's position has been disproved 'by means of a direct refutation, that is, by establishing that consciousness of external objects is immediate, the how-part has already been covered' (p. 14).

In what sense has the 'how-part' already been covered? Perhaps the idea is this: the question 'How is outer experience possible for us?' is equivalent to the question 'How is it possible for us to have perceptual knowledge of spatial objects?'. Kant's answer is: 'By being immediately conscious of such objects'. Immediate consciousness is, in other words, the *means* by which we have outer experience. Given that we have inner experience, the availability of such means is guaranteed by the argument of the Refutation. So Kant gives what I call a *means response* to the how-possible question, one that explains how outer experience is possible by specifying means by which it is possible, but a means response that is underpinned by the transcendental argument of the Refutation.

The question that now arises is this: how is immediate consciousness of objects in space possible, if immediate consciousness is the kind of thing that is supposed to yield *knowledge* of such objects? The sceptic's introduction of various alternative uneliminated possibilities makes it look as though immediate consciousness of objects is not possible, so the challenge is to explain how such immediate consciousness is possible. The Refutation is of limited use in this context. It tells us that we must be immediately conscious of objects in space but it does not tell us how such a thing is possible. It assures us that the supposed obstacles to immediate consciousness of objects in space cannot be genuine but it does not tell us how they can be overcome. Explaining how outer experience is possible is, or should be, a matter of explaining in detail how the sceptic's possibilities can be eliminated or why their elimination is not necessary for outer experience. Since the Refutation does neither of these things it cannot be said to explain how outer experience is possible. Showing that outer experience is necessary is not the same as showing how it is possible.

None of this is to say that transcendental arguments are of no use in epistemology. If the question is *whether* knowledge of the external world is possible then a transcendental argument of the kind that Kant develops in the Refutation of Idealism would be very much to the point, at least on the assumption that anti-sceptical transcendental arguments have any chance of success. My concern is not with *whether* knowledge of the external world is possible but with *how* it is possible. If we cannot understand how it is possible then that might lead us to question whether it is possible. But merely being satisfied *that* it is possible does not entitle us to conclude that we have a proper understanding of how it is possible. I contend that it is the multi-levels model, with its emphasis on means, obstacle-removal, and enabling conditions that provides the kind of illumination that those who ask how-possible questions in epistemology are, or should be, seeking.

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