Three Levels and a Regress?

A Comment on Quassim Cassam's "The Possibility of Knowledge"

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Outline

1. The 3-Levels Approach

3 Levels of How-Possible-Questions

- Level 1: Means Response
- Level 2: Obstacle Removing Level
- Level 3: Enabling Conditions

Level 1: Means Response

"A Means Response to a how-possible question regards the identification of one or more of the means by which something can come about as a means of explaining how it is possible. So, for example, if perceiving is a means of coming to know something about the world around us then it is also a means by which knowledge of the external world is possible."
(Cassam 2007: 6)

Level 2: Obstacle Removing Level

- **Obstacle-Overcoming Response:**
  An obstacle-overcoming response would be one which shows that the requirement which is an obstacle to answering a How-Possible Question (HPQ) *can* in fact be met.
- **Obstacle-Dissipating Response:**
  "An obstacle-dissipating response, in contrast, would be one which makes it plausible that there is no such requirement." (Cassam 2007: 8)

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Level 3: Enabling Conditions

- What makes it possible for us to acquire knowledge of kind K by means M?
  "This is a question about what might be called the *enabling conditions* of [knowledge of kind K], the conditions under which it is possible for [M] to be a source of knowledge of [kind K] . . .
- . . . The thought that underpins this question is that there is more to explaining how something is possible than showing that it isn't impossible." (Cassam 2007: 9)

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What does a Multi-Levels Response look like?

"A multi-levels response to a how-possible question operates on different levels. Level 1 is the level of means, the level at which means of knowing about a certain subject matter are identified. (. . .) Level 2 is the obstacle-removing level, the level at which obstacles to the acquisition of knowledge by the proposed means are overcome or dissipated. Finally, Level 3 is the level at which enabling conditions for knowing by the proposed means are identified."(Cassam 2007: 10)

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Philosophical Positions regarding HPQs:

1. Minimalism
2. Moderate Anti-Minimalism
3. Radical Anti-Minimalism

Connection with the Multi-Levels Response:

- It is the aim of both kinds of anti-minimalism to give Level 3 responses to HPQs, i.e., to formulate enabling conditions and thus answer further what-makes-it-possible-questions.
- Minimalists, on the other hand, take it that a Level 2 response, i.e., the removal of obstacles is all that philosophy has to say about HPQs.

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My Thesis

Although anti-minimalism is philosophically more satisfying, it gives rise to a regress (§§ 2 + 3), that can only be avoided by means of further methodological restrictions (§ 4).

2. Implications of Enabling Conditions

A Problem:

Consider the following scenario (cf. Cassam 2007: 20):

- A theorist, let's call her Claire, has successfully removed various obstacles to a HPQ.
- However, Claire is not yet satisfied and thus formulates an enabling condition C for the acquisition of knowledge of kind K by means M, in order to explain what-makes-it-possible to gain knowledge of kind K.
- Now, some destructive philosopher, let's call him Peter the Pyrrhonian, shows that C is not fulfilled.
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Why is this problematic at all?

- "...if C is an enabling condition for the acquisition of knowledge of kind K by means M then the non-fulfilment of C can't fail to represent an obstacle to the acquisition of K by M."
- "...when an enabling condition C for the acquisition of K by M isn't fulfilled, the very fact that it isn't becomes an obstacle to the acquisition of K by M." (Cassam 2007: 20)

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The *real* problem:

- It looks as if any enabling condition C implies a vast number of other propositions.
- As soon as we deny one of the implied propositions we can construct a *modus tollens* that leads to the denial of C itself, which in turn makes C an obstacle.
- That is, at least in principle, the formulation of C can *always* produce obstacles that have to be removed on Level 2.
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3. A Regress?

An example:

1. HPQ: How is it possible to get from London to Paris in less than three hours?
   - By catching the Eurostar
2. The Anti-Minimalist: But what makes it possible to get from London to Paris by train?
   - C: The existence of the Channel Tunnel.
3. P_1: But do you know that the tunnel did not collapse yesterday?
   - Yes, I checked with the travel agency this morning.
4. P_2: But how do you know that the travel agency is a reliable source?
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- What makes this form of scepticism problematic for the Multi-Levels Account is

1. that it is always **obstacle dependent** and
2. that it does **not** introduce any initially plausible requirement that turns out to have unacceptable consequences.

- All it does is challenging an enabling condition (or one of the propositions it implies) and thereby making it an obstacle that has to be removed.

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The mechanism ...

(1) $C \rightarrow \exists$(satisfying answer to P_1)

(2) $\neg \exists$(satisfying answer to P_1) $\rightarrow \neg C$

(3) $\neg C \rightarrow$ A new obstacle to the acquisition of K by M

This does ***not*** show:

- that the proposed means M is not a means to achieve knowledge of type K.

However, it *does* show:

- that the explanation of the enabling condition C offered *so far* is not sufficient. Rather, it gives rise to another obstacle that has to be removed.
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- Regress looms.

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4. Means of Egress

How to avoid a regress

1. Give up anti-minimalism!
2. Find some "ultimate", irreducible enabling condition!
3. Give up the Principle of Closure!
4. Become a contextualist!

1. Give up anti-minimalism!

The minimalist could argue that the obstacles raised by the denial

a) of enabling condition C, or

b) of one of the propositions it implies,
are no obstacles for the first genuine HPQ.

In this case, they would not threaten the Level 2 solution to HPQ.

But:

- Instead of indirectly challenging the answer to HPQ by denying C, Peter could as well think about new obstacles directly.

Nonetheless:

- This might be avoided by the focus on the obstacle-dependence of HPQ.
- Other than in case of the formulation of further enabling conditions this obstacle-dependence is not 'loosened' by Claire herself.

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2. Find some irreducible enabling condition!

An irreducible condition would be one that Peter could not (reasonably) deny. Here are some suggestions ...

1. Either there would be only a few (or one?) that can be applied to all sensible HPQs.
2. Or every sensible HPQ would have it's own irreducible condition.
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This would amount to a position somehow related to Dretske's in *Epistemic Operators* (1970).

- The basic claim would be that knowledge of the implications of enabling conditions is not always relevant for the knowledge of C.
- Then the failure to exclude the denial of these implications would not result in not knowing C.

- According to this line of reasoning, Claire's failure to know that the Tunnel did not collapse yesterday, does not avoid her from knowing that the enabling condition (the existence of the Channel Tunnel) holds.
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4. Become a contextualist!

(Methodological) contextualism can ...

- maintain the Closure Principle
- restrict the implications of C that have to be known by Claire

How does it do this?

- The context of utterance/discussion of a certain HPQ sets the standards and/or requirements for a successful answer to HPQ.
- This could also be applied to the formulation of enabling conditions.
- That is, the context determines which implications of C are relevant and which can be neglected.
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5. Conclusion

It could be shown that:

- At first sight, the combination of anti-minimalism and the 3-Levels account seems to lead to a methodological regress.
- But, as I tried to show, there are some more or less attractive ways out of this regress.
- **Upshot:** Contextualism seems to fare best considering the methodological 'costs and benefits', as it is able to maintain closure and allows for a kind of anti-minimalism that does not threaten sensible answers to how-possible-questions.

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Thank you for your attention