

# The Lottery Paradox

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Jeff Speaks

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## 1 The paradox

The ‘lottery paradox’ is a kind of skeptical argument: that is, it is a kind of argument designed to show that we do not know many of the things we ordinarily take ourselves to know. One way of presenting the paradox is based on the following plausible claim:

If I know that  $p$ , and know that if  $p$ , then  $q$ , I am in a position to know that  $q$ .

We generate cases of the paradox by substituting in for ‘ $p$ ’ some claim which we ordinarily take ourselves to know, and substitute in for ‘ $q$ ’ some claim which follows from the claim substituted in for ‘ $p$ ’ which we take ourselves *not* to be in a position to know.

Here are some examples from Hawthorne’s *Knowledge and Lotteries*:

“...many normal people of modest means will be willing, under normal circumstances, to judge that they know that they will not have enough money to go on an African safari in the near future. And under normal circumstances, their conversational partners will be willing to accept that judgement as correct.

However ... [w]e do not suppose that people know in advance of a lottery drawing whether they will win or lose. But what is going on here? The proposition that the person will not have enough money to go on an African safari this year entails that he will not win a major prize in a lottery. If the person knows the former, then isn’t he at least in position to know the latter by performing a simple deduction?”

Here, we have the following claims filled in to the schema above:

$p$  = I will not have enough money to go on an African safari next year.

$q$  = I will not win a major prize in a lottery for the rest of this year.

We are inclined to say that someone can know the truth of  $p$ , but that this knowledge does not put him in a position to know the truth of  $q$ . But this is puzzling, since  $q$  follows from  $p$  – and the person might know this.

Other examples of the same sort are easy to generate, and needn't involve lotteries:

“I am inclined to think that I know that I will be living in Syracuse for part of this summer. But once the question arises, I am not inclined to think that I know whether or not I will be one of the unlucky people who, despite being apparently healthy, will suffer a fatal heart attack in the next week.”

“I am inclined to think that I know where my car is parked right now. But once the question arises, I am not inclined to think that I know whether or not I am one of the unlucky people whose car has been stolen during the last few hours.”

Can you see how these cases can be fit into the model of the example of the lottery and the African safari?

In these examples, we have some proposition — following Hawthorne, let's call it an *ordinary proposition* — which is some proposition of the kind of which we usually take ourselves to have unproblematic knowledge, and some other proposition — the *lottery proposition* — which is entailed by the ordinary proposition but which we do not usually take ourselves to know.

So, in responding to these cases, it looks like we have three choices:

- Deny that we know the ordinary proposition.
- Concede that we know the lottery proposition.
- Deny that knowing  $p$ , while validly deducing  $q$  from  $p$ , is enough to know  $q$ .

The problem — and the reason why this is an example of a paradox — is that none of these options seems very appealing.

## 2 Skepticism

Let's explore the first option: that, almost always, when we say that we know something, what we say is false. In reality, we know hardly anything.

This is quite hard to believe. It also seems to conflict with certain plausible-seeming claims about knowledge, like the following claim about assertion:

One should assert only what one knows.

It would follow from this + skepticism that we should hardly ever assert anything. But surely this is not right.

Consider also:

In deliberating about what to do, you should only use known propositions as premises.

Surely the paradox should not convince us that almost all of our practical reasoning is flawed.

It seems as though skepticism should only be an option of last resort.

### 3 Simple anti-skepticism

The opposite response is simply to affirm that we know the lottery proposition.

This faces serious problems. If we say that we know that, for example, person 1 will not win the lottery, then it seems plausible, by parity of reasoning, to say the same thing about person 2, person 3, etc. But then it seems that we can know of an arbitrarily large percentage of the ticket holders that they will not win the lottery. But this seems absurd.

A further problem results if we allow that if we know a number of truths, and know that these entail some further truth, we are in a position to know the further truth as well.

Closure principles, and the paradox of the preface.

### 4 Contextualism

A different response is to say that ‘knows’ is a context-sensitive expression, like ‘I’ or ‘here.’

One thought might be that someone knows  $p$  if and only if they believe  $p$ ,  $p$  is true, and their evidence is good enough for the context.

What might ‘good enough for the context’ mean? Some possibilities:

- The evidence rules out alternate possibilities which the person to whom knowledge is attributed takes to be relevant.

- The evidence rules out alternate possibilities which the person attributing knowledge takes to be relevant.
- The evidence rules out alternate possibilities which are relevant in the conversation in which knowledge is being attributed.

Some intuitive problems with these possibilities.

A possible problem for contextualism which Hawthorne develops: whether it is true to say that I know something can depend on the context of the discussion. But can whether I was correct to assert something, or whether I was correct to use a premise in practical reasoning, also depend on the context of discussion?