

# STUMBLING IN NOZICK'S TRACKS

John TURRI

ABSTRACT: Rachael Briggs and Daniel Nolan have recently proposed an improved version of Nozick's tracking account of knowledge. I show that, despite its virtues, the new proposal suffers from three serious problems.

KEYWORDS: knowledge, tracking theory, sensitivity, Robert Nozick, Rachael Briggs, Daniel Nolan

Following a recent trend,<sup>1</sup> Rachael Briggs and Daniel Nolan seek to bolster Nozick's tracking theory of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Nozick proposed that you know that P iff:

- (1) P is true.
- (2) You believe P.
- (3) If P hadn't been true, then you wouldn't have believed P.
- (4) If P had been true, then you would have believed P.

Nozick's view has been rejected over and over again in the literature,<sup>3</sup> almost invariably on the basis of purportedly devastating counterexamples.<sup>4</sup>

Briggs and Nolan propose an alternative analysis of knowledge that resists some of the counterexamples.<sup>5</sup> Their solution is to rely on *dispositions* rather than subjunctive conditionals in the third and fourth clauses of the analysis. They propose that you know that P iff:

- (1) P is true.
- (2) You believe P.
- (3\*) You are disposed to not believe P in the circumstances where P is not true.

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Fred Adams and Murray Clarke, "Resurrecting the Tracking Theories," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83, 2 (2005): 207–221; Sherrilyn Roush, *Tracking Truth: Knowledge, Evidence, and Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Tim Black and Peter Murphy "In Defense of Sensitivity," *Synthese* 154, 1 (2007): 53–71.

<sup>2</sup> Rachael Briggs and Daniel Nolan "Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know," *Analysis* 72, 2 (2012): 314–316.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Schaffer, "Perceptual Knowledge Derailed," *Philosophical studies*, 112, 1 (2003): 31–4; Jonathan Vogel, "Subjunctivitis," *Philosophical studies* 134, 1 (2007): 73–88; Saul Kripke, *Philosophical Troubles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), ch. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Briggs and Nolan, "Mad, Bad."

(4\*) You are disposed to believe P in the circumstances where P is true.<sup>6</sup>

Call this the *dispositional tracking account*, as opposed to Nozick's original *subjunctive tracking account*.

I agree that the dispositional tracking account improves on the subjunctive tracking account in some ways. It handles some cases that the subjunctive account can't, as Briggs and Nolan effectively argue. But the dispositional account still suffers from several very serious problems, which it shares in common with the subjunctive account. I will focus on three such remaining problems.

First, consider this case, which seems to be a straightforward counterexample to the dispositional tracking account:

(DOOR) The automatic door improbably malfunctions and closes prematurely, striking Dora hard on her ankle. This causes excruciating pain, on which basis Dora believes that she is in pain. But very easily the door could have delivered a mere glancing blow, causing only very minor discomfort rather than pain. Moreover, Dora is a hypochondriac disposed to believe that she is in pain, even when she experiences only minor discomfort.

Dora knows that she is in pain. But the dispositional tracking account implies that she doesn't know, because she fails to satisfy condition 3\*. Dora is not disposed to not believe that she is in pain in the circumstance where she isn't in pain.

Second, the dispositional tracking account entails that we can't know that we exist, which is absurd. I know that I exist. But I lack any disposition to do, or to not do, anything when I no longer exist. In particular, I am not disposed to not believe that I exist in the circumstance where I don't exist. So the dispositional tracking account implies that I don't know that I exist, because I fail to satisfy condition 3\*. Of course, it is *true* that I will not believe that I exist in the circumstance where I don't exist. But the reason it is true isn't that I have a disposition to not believe that I exist in such circumstances.

Third, the dispositional tracking account makes it strangely difficult to have second-order knowledge. Take any mundane belief that satisfies the conditions of the dispositional tracking account, such as your belief that you ate a sandwich for lunch, and let 'Q' abbreviate this proposition you believe. Clearly you know that

---

<sup>6</sup> In their official formulation, instead of 'is not true' in 3\*, Briggs and Nolan write 'does not obtain'; and instead of 'is true' in 4\*, they write, 'obtains'. But it's much more natural to speak of a proposition *being true* (or not) than to speak of it *obtaining* (or not). And in explaining their view, Briggs and Nolan speak of propositions being true, rather than obtaining. For example, "In each case, our subjects have an epistemically relevant disposition to believe the relevant proposition if it is true, and not to believe the relevant proposition if it is not true." For these reasons, I use 'true' rather than 'obtains' in formulating their view.

Q, and the dispositional account gets this right. Now suppose that you also believe that your belief that Q is true, and let 'R' abbreviate this proposition you believe. R seems like something that you could easily know, in just about any case where you know that Q. But you fail to satisfy condition 3\* with respect to R. That is, the following disposition-ascription is false, at least in cases where you know that Q:

You are disposed to not believe R in the circumstances where R is not true.

If you are neither incoherent, peculiarly diffident, nor basing your belief that Q upon grounds that would appear inadequate upon reflection, then you are disposed believe that your belief that Q is true, even when it is in fact false. And, typically at least, if you know Q, then you are neither incoherent, peculiarly diffident, nor basing your belief upon reflectively inadequate grounds. (Of course, this disposition of yours is defeasible – you aren't irredeemably stubborn or incorrigible – but so are most dispositions.) Thus, according to the dispositional tracking account, you know that you ate a sandwich for lunch, but you don't know that you know that you ate a sandwich for lunch. I submit that this result is implausible. And the result will generalize to many of our first-order beliefs.

In sum, although the dispositional tracking account is an improvement over the original subjunctive tracking account, it still suffers from many of the same serious problems. Despite making modest progress along the path Nozick helped to pioneer, it has been halted in its tracks.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Rachael Briggs and Angelo Turri for helpful conversation and feedback.