

# Close to the Truth

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## *Abstract*

We often think or say that someone was wrong about something but almost right about it or close to the truth. This can mean more than one thing. Here, I propose an analysis of the idea of being epistemically close to the truth. This idea plays an important role in our practice of epistemic evaluation and therefore deserves some detailed attention. I start (section1) with an exposition of the idea of getting things right by looking at the main forms of reliabilism about true belief and belief acquisition. The focus on reliabilism is justified because (almost) everyone is a reliabilist in a basic sense. Section 2 develops a notion of closeness to the truth in two steps. Section 3 mentions some ways in which this notion is useful, one having to do with the Gettier problem.

Keywords: Knowledge; True belief; Closeness; Reliabilism; Gettier

We often think or say that someone was wrong about something but almost right about it or close to the truth. This can mean more than one thing.<sup>1</sup> Here, I will propose an analysis of the idea of being epistemically close to the truth.<sup>2</sup> This idea plays an important role in our practice of epistemic evaluation and therefore deserves some detailed attention. I will start (section1) with an exposition of the idea of getting things right by looking at the main forms of reliabilism about true belief and belief acquisition. This is a necessary preparation for the next steps. The focus on reliabilism is justified because (almost) everyone is a reliabilist in a basic sense (see Author). Section 2

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1 For related issues see, e.g., Sorensen 2016.

2 I will thus not go much at all into the topic of truthlikeness (see, e.g., Oddie 2016). This notion can be explained or construed in several different ways the details of which need not concern us here. But one can give some ostensive definitions or examples. For instance, an utterance of “It is 3pm now” when it is only 2:59:32pm at the moment of utterance is closer to the truth than an utterance of “It is 1:30pm now”. Or, if Newton’s theory is not strictly true, it is (so it seems) much closer to the truth about laws of motion than Aristotle’s views on the subject. Truthlikeness is thus a semantic notion having to do with “closeness” or similarity between contents; it is not an epistemic notion concerning our relation to such contents. It is important to keep these different meanings of “close to the truth” apart.

develops a notion of closeness to the truth in two steps. Section 3 mentions some ways in which this notion is useful.

### *1. Getting Things Right*

According to a currently much supported view about knowledge, the safety view (see, e.g., Sosa 1999), a safe true belief that  $p$  amounts to knowledge that  $p$ .<sup>3</sup> Here is a basic explanation of the safety of a true belief:

(Belief-Safety) A true belief that  $p$  is safe just in case in all (or most) close possible worlds in which the subject believes that  $p$ , using the same method of belief acquisition as in the actual case,  $p$  is the case.

Now, a subject might believe a necessary truth for all the wrong reasons or on the basis of using generally unreliable methods. In order to prevent such a subject from being qualified as a safe believer that  $p$  or a knower that  $p$ , many adherents of the safety view add a further condition into (Belief-Safety) (or to the conditions for knowledge):

(Method-Safety) A method used in the acquisition of a true belief that  $p$  is safe just in case use of the method in all (or most) close possible worlds leads to true beliefs of the same kind<sup>4</sup> as the belief that  $p$ .

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3 This is a very basic and rough form of the view but we need not concern us with whistles and bells here. The same holds for all the other conditions and explanations that I will present below.  
– If safety requires truth of the belief in the actual world, then we can also simply say that safe belief is knowledge.

4 We can and need to leave aside questions concerning the individuation of kinds of beliefs.

Tracking or sensitivity theories of knowledge (see Dretske 1971 and Nozick 1981) antedate safety theories amongst modal forms of reliabilism.<sup>5</sup> Finally, there is also a non-modal, probabilistic form of reliabilism.<sup>6</sup> For ease of exposition, and without prejudice, we can focus here on the safety version (see the parallels in the footnotes). - So much for the basic forms of reliabilism.

## 2. Far from the Truth, Somewhat Close, and Close

Now, what about false beliefs? It seems that, like true beliefs, false beliefs can also be either safely or unsafely false, sensitively or non-sensitively false, or reliably or unreliably false. Suppose I'm counting beans. I'm usually pretty good at this kind of thing but this time I'm distracted by an explosion and count one bean twice: there are 72 but I count 73. So, I acquire a false belief that there are 73 beans in front of me. Since

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5 According to Nozick (see 1981, 172-196), a true belief is knowledge (if and) only if it meets two conditions, a variation and an adherence condition:

(Belief-Sensitivity-v) A true belief that  $p$  is sensitive-v just in case in all (or most) close possible worlds in which not  $p$ , the subject (using the same method as in the actual case) doesn't believe that  $p$ ;

(Belief-Sensitivity-a) A true belief that  $p$  is sensitive-a just in case in all (or most) close possible worlds in which  $p$ , the subject (using the same method as in the actual case) does believe that  $p$ .

Again, one might want to add conditions of method sensitivity:

(Method-Sensitivity-v) A method used in the acquisition of a true belief that  $p$  is sensitive-v just in case in all (or most) close possible worlds in which  $p$  or a proposition of the same kind as  $p$  is false the subject does not, using that method, come to believe that proposition;

(Method-Sensitivity-a) A method used in the acquisition of a true belief that  $p$  is sensitive-a just in case in all (or most) close possible worlds in which  $p$  or a proposition of the same kind as  $p$  is true the subject does, using that method, come to believe that proposition.

I am using the term "sensitivity" like "tracking" and for both conditions, in contrast to Nozick's use of the term. I am not aiming at the most correct interpretation of, say, Nozick here but rather at capturing the core of the idea of sensitivity.

6 This requires something different for knowledge:

(Belief-Reliability) A true belief that  $p$ , resulting from the use of a certain method  $M$ , is reliable just in case the probability of ending up with a true belief about whether  $p$  is high, given that one uses  $M$ .

Here is a corresponding condition for method-reliability:

(Method-Reliability) A method used in the acquisition of a true belief that  $p$  is reliable just in case use of the method for finding out whether  $p$  or a proposition of the same kind is true has a high probability of leading to a true belief about the matter.

I could have easily been right about this, my belief fails to meet a safety condition for false belief:

(Inverse Belief-Safety) A false belief that  $p$  is inversely safe just in case in all (or most) close possible worlds in which the subject believes that  $p$ , using the same method as in the actual case,  $p$  is false.

Perhaps my belief violates this condition – perhaps there could have been one more bean on the table. But perhaps not. (Inverse Belief-Safety) is not (always) easy to apply. It is therefore more plausible and seems more important and relevant here that I fail to meet a certain safety condition for the method used:

(Inverse Method-Safety) A method used in the acquisition of a false belief that  $p$  is inversely safe just in case use of the method in all (or most) close possible worlds leads to false beliefs of the same kind as the belief that  $p$ .<sup>7</sup>

In the bean case above I could have easily ended up with a true belief. I was wrong but not very stably wrong: I failed to meet (Inverse Method-Safety).<sup>8</sup>

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7 It is possible that two methods M1 and M2 are both inversely method-safe but one (M1) is much “closer to the truth” in the sense of truthlikeness (see fn.2 above) than the other. For instance, my way of estimating spatial distance (M1) might be slightly off and systematically lead to a small deviation from the truth whereas my way of estimating the success of political candidates (M2, driven, say, by wishful thinking) systematically leads me to grossly incorrect beliefs about the matter. It is obvious that M1 is better in an important respect than M2. However, here I am not dealing with the virtues of truthlikeness (see above) but with the different virtue of being close to the truth in the sense discussed here. Thanks to NN who pressed me on this point.

8 We can describe the above bean counting case also by using notions of inverse sensitivity:  
 (Inverse Belief-Sensitivity-v) A false belief that  $p$  is inversely sensitive-v just in case: In all (or most) close possible worlds in which  $p$  is true, the subject (using the same method as in the actual case) doesn’t believe that  $p$ ;

All this suggests a very preliminary notion of being somewhat though not too close (close~) to the truth: A subject is reliably close~ to the truth just in case they violate inverse reliability conditions. Neglecting the differences between the different types of closeness (safety, sensitivity, probabilism) we could simply talk about being close~ to the truth (in whatever specific way). If we can have a good unique metric for modal closeness of worlds or a good unique probabilistic ranking, then we can have a metric for closeness~ to the truth. Having such a metric would be useful and interesting in many ways.

However, the notion of closeness to the truth just proposed is still too weak (though somewhat “close to the truth” in a different sense: see fn.1,2). If, for instance, a subject violates any of the above inverse conditions they might still get things wrong in many cases and get it right in many but not in almost or nearly almost all cases. Intuitively, we wouldn’t count these cases as being (really) close to the truth. Hence, we should

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(Inverse Belief-Sensitivity-a) A false belief that  $p$  is inversely sensitive-a just in case: In all (or most) close possible worlds in which *not*  $p$  is true, the subject (using the same method as in the actual case) does believe that  $p$ .

My false belief failed to meet either of these conditions. One can also characterize my false belief as failing to meet inverse method sensitivity conditions:

(Inverse Method-Sensitivity-v) A method used in the acquisition of a false belief that  $p$  is inversely sensitive-v just in case in all (or most) close possible worlds in which  $p$  or a proposition of the same kind as  $p$  is true the subject does not, using that method, come to believe that proposition;

(Inverse Method-Sensitivity-a) A method used in the acquisition of a false belief that  $p$  is inversely sensitive-a just in case in all (or most) close possible worlds in which  $p$  or a proposition of the same kind as  $p$  is false the subject does, using that method, come to believe that proposition.

Finally, we can also express things in terms of inverse reliability:

(Inverse Belief-Reliability) A false belief that  $p$ , resulting from the use of a certain method  $M$ , is inversely reliable just in case the probability of ending up with a false belief about whether  $p$  is high, given that one uses  $M$ ;

(Inverse Method-Reliability) A method used in the acquisition of a false belief that  $p$  is inversely reliable just in case use of the method for finding out whether  $p$  or a proposition of the same kind is true has a high probability of leading to a false belief about the matter.

strengthen the conditions for being close to the truth (or briefly” being “close”) further in the following way:

(Safe Belief-Closeness) A false belief that  $p$  is safely close just in case in all (or most) close possible worlds in which the subject believes that  $p$ , using the same method as in the actual case,  $p$  is true;

(Safe Method-Closeness) A method used in the acquisition of a false belief that  $p$  is safely close just in case use of the method in all (or most) close possible worlds leads to true beliefs of the same kind as the belief that  $p$ .<sup>9</sup>

Let us then take being close to the truth (or just: “being close”) to consist in meeting such conditions. We can leave the question open here which one of the above conditions one should choose as the definitive notion of being close to the truth; perhaps each of

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9 Here are the parallel conditions for the other forms of reliabilism:

(Sensitive-v Belief-Closeness) A false belief that  $p$  is sensitively-v close just in case: In all (or most) close possible worlds in which  $p$  is true, the subject (using the same method as in the actual case) does believe that  $p$ ;

(Sensitive-a Belief-Closeness) A false belief that  $p$  is sensitively-a close just in case: In all (or most) close possible worlds in which *not*  $p$  is true, the subject (using the same method as in the actual case) does believe that *not*  $p$ ;

(Sensitive-v Method-Closeness) A method used in the acquisition of a false belief that  $p$  is sensitively-v close just in case in all (or most) close possible worlds in which  $p$  or a proposition of the same kind as  $p$  is true the subject does, using that method, come to believe that proposition;

(Sensitive-a Method-Closeness) A method used in the acquisition of a false belief that  $p$  is sensitively-a close just in case in all (or most) close possible worlds in which  $p$  or a proposition of the same kind as  $p$  is false the subject does, using that method, come to believe the negation of that proposition;

(Reliable Belief-Closeness) A false belief that  $p$ , resulting from the use of a certain method  $M$ , is reliably close just in case the probability of ending up with a true belief about whether  $p$  is high, given that one uses  $M$ ;

(Reliable Method Closeness) A method used in the acquisition of a false belief that  $p$  is reliably close just in case use of the method for finding out whether  $p$  or a proposition of the same kind is true has a high probability of leading to a true belief about the matter.

them has its use in some contexts. The above conditions reformulate the original reliability conditions for the case of a false belief.

### 3. Why Getting Close Is Interesting

As pointed out above, the notion of being close to the truth plays an important role in epistemic evaluation in general. We can imagine adding a comparative notion of being closer to the truth and putting that to work in comparative epistemic evaluations (“Jo was pretty close to the truth but Mo was even closer”). We can also imagine adding a graded notion of being close to the truth and putting that to work in more fine-grained epistemic evaluations (“Jo was very close to the truth”).<sup>10</sup>

There are also some other advantages of having a good idea of closeness: It can help understand an important type of Gettier cases better, namely those in which the subject’s belief is based on some false premise. Take, for instance, Gettier’s original case about Smith (see Gettier 1963, 122-123) who justifiably but falsely believes that Jones owns a Ford and infers from this the true disjunction that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona (where Smith has no reason to believe the second, true disjunct). No matter whether Smith is close to the truth or not, he doesn’t know the disjunction. Interestingly, however, if he had not even been close to the truth of the first disjunct (for instance, if he had just made a wild guess about Jones’ Ford ownership), then we would not consider him to be justified and thus also not gettiered.<sup>11</sup> We only do count Smith as

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10 This requires a good metric for closeness of possible worlds which, some say, is very hard to get (if at all possible).

11 What if Smith is confused about Jones or Fords (say, typically mistakes Jones for Miller and Fords for Buicks)? Is he still thinking or talking about Jones or some Ford? We can leave this

justified and in a Gettier case because he was close to the truth. More precisely: Smith is in a Gettier case because he is method-close to the truth, whether in a safe, sensitive or reliabilist<sup>12</sup> way.

This is, however, not the whole picture yet. Consider a type of cases used by some to show that there can be knowledge from falsehood (see, e.g., Warfield 2005). In Warfield's well-known handout case a person brings 100 handouts to their talk, counts people in the room and, inadvertently counting one person twice, ends up with the wrong result that there are 53 persons in the room (instead of 52). From this falsehood the person infers that they have a sufficient number of handouts with them. Does the person thereby come to know that they have a sufficient number of handouts with them? Supporters of a positive answer face the challenge of explaining how this can be true and why in the typical Gettier cases inferring a true proposition from a false one does not lead to knowledge (see Bernecker forthcoming). Even if one denies that in cases like Warfield's the subject can come to know the conclusion, one would still have to explain what the relevant difference between Gettier cases and alleged knowledge-from-falsehood cases (which are not Gettier cases) is.

Now, one important difference between these two cases is that in the latter case a less precise method was available to the subject such that the subject would have arrived at the true conclusion by using that less precise method. For instance, the subject could have made rough but unrisky estimates (rather than counted) and reasoned, for

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complicated question aside here since it doesn't affect the main point here and only complicates our view of Gettier cases. Thanks to NN here.

12 It is not clear at all whether Smith is safely or sensitively belief-close. – In the case of reliabilism, one could also, arguably, use belief-closeness as a condition. I am leaving this complication aside here.



instance, in the following way: “There are at most 15 people over there, at most 20 over there, and, finally, certainly not more than 30 people over there; this is still way below 100; hence, I have a sufficient number of handouts.” In contrast to this, there is no such less precise method available to the subject in Gettier cases involving false premises. This suggests the following characterization of false-premise Gettier cases (especially since no other relevant difference is to be noticed here):

A justified true belief based upon and dependent on a false premise is a gettiered belief only if the subject’s belief in the false premise is method-close to the truth and there was no less precise method available to the subject.

We could strengthen the right-hand side and formulate a bi-conditional. However, I prefer to leave it open here whether the above already identifies necessary and sufficient conditions. My aim is rather to show that a notion of closeness to the truth can help us also with the understanding of Gettier cases and thus, indirectly, of knowledge.

The above explanation of false lemma cases won’t, however, help much with stopped clock or fake barn cases (see Russell 1948, 98 and Goldman 1992, 86) where it is not clear that any false belief is involved and where the gettierization is not based on the use of false premises. But as we can see, the idea of closeness to the truth can help with some Gettier-cases. More generally: Even if a notion of closeness to the truth does not help us with all kinds of problems in epistemology, it can help us with some. And this is close enough.

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