

# Is epistemic safety threatened by Frankfurt cases?

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# Plan

- ① Summary
- ② Safety Condition (SC)
- ③ Advantages of (SC)
- ④ Counterexamples against (SC)
- ⑤ Reply
- ⑥ References

# Summary

In this talk I intend to argue that the **counterexamples** inspired by the Frankfurt-type cases against the **necessity of an epistemic safety** condition for knowledge **are not plausible**. In order to defend this conclusion I want to analyze, first, what the epistemic safety condition is.

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## Safety Condition (SC)

The **epistemic safety condition** is a **modal condition** recently supported by Sosa (1999) and Pritchard (2015), among others, and can be formulated as follows:

(SC)

If S knows that p, then S's true belief that p could not have easily been false.

In other words, condition **(SC)** says that, in cases of knowledge, S's true belief that p is such that, in *close possible worlds* (i.e. in very similar circumstances), if S continues to hold p on the same basis as he does in the actual world, then S's belief that p continues to be true.

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For example:

- Suppose Mary comes down the stairs in the morning to have breakfast, and when she looks at her normally reliable clock in the kitchen, it's 8:20 am.
- Additionally, suppose this belief is true and that it is in fact 8:20 am.
- Here we have a case in which Mary forms a justified true belief that seems to be the result of a reliable process.

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- However, suppose that the clock has actually stopped 24 hours ago, and it is just a matter of luck that Mary looks at the clock precisely at the only time of the day when it shows the correct time.
- In this case, even though Mary has good evidence or justification to believe that it is 8:20 am and her belief is true, **she does not know** that it is 8:20 am, since **her belief is true by mere luck**.
- Now, condition **(SC)** may explain why such examples would not be cases of knowledge, because it would be easy for Mary to believe that it is 8:20 am when in fact it is not 8:20 am (it would suffice that she was in a very similar circumstance, but looked at the broken clock one minute before or after 8:20 am);
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## Counterexamples against (SC)

However, there is a new and interesting objection against the necessity of this condition **(SC)** for knowledge inspired by the famous cases of Harry Frankfurt (1969) concerning the problem of the compatibility between determinism and free will (in the relevant sense for moral responsibility).

Schematically, in the original Frankfurt cases, we have the following situation:

- A subject chooses a certain course of action, but had he opted for a different one, an external factor would intervene to ensure that he would act the way he actually did. Thus, in such cases, the subject could not have acted differently.
- However, in the actual situation, since nothing actually intervened to affect his action, it seems correct to say that the subject was morally responsible for the course of action he adopted.
- Thus, it seems that a subject's action may be properly due to his agency, as a result of which he is morally responsible, even when he could not have acted otherwise.

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Based on this, one can imagine an **epistemic case analogous to a Frankfurt-type case** to argue against the necessity of **(SC)**, as proposed by Comesaña (2013) and Kelp (2009, 2016).

For example:

- Suppose that Mary's arch-nemesis, a powerful demon, is interested that she forms the belief that it's 8:20 am by looking at her kitchen clock when she comes down the stairs.
- In order to achieve this goal, Mary's arch-nemesis is prepared to set the clock for 8:20 am when she comes down the stairs.
- However, Mary's arch-nemesis is also lazy. He will act only when Mary does not come down the stairs, by her own accord, at 8:20 am.

Suppose Mary comes down the stairs at 8:20 am and that she believes that it's 8:20 am. Her arch-nemesis is prepared to set the clock for 8:20 am and he does so only if she does not come down the stairs at 8:20 am. In this case, Mary's belief that it's 8:20 am is not safe.



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- Suppose Mary comes down the stairs at 8:20 am. Mary's arch-nemesis remains inactive. So, Mary forms the belief that it's 8:20 am, it really is 8:20 am, and her kitchen clock is working reliably as well.

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Critics of condition **(SC)** claim that Mary knows that it is 8:20 am:

- After all, we can assume that her belief was the result of properly functioning cognitive faculties, responding adequately and reliably to the evidence.
- Moreover, the clock was working properly and Mary's reading of the time was accurate.
- However, her belief does not satisfy the safety condition (SC). This is because among the close possible worlds are those worlds where Mary comes down the stairs a few minutes sooner or later. In those worlds the arch-enemy intervenes, and thus Mary forms a false belief that it is 8:20 am.
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## Reply

Nevertheless, I think that this counterexample, or ones similar to it, do not work. This is because:

- I do not share the intuition that Mary has knowledge in that case. For, after all, given how Mary formed her belief, it was a matter of sheer chance that it ended up being a true belief. Had she come down the stairs a minute before or a minute later she would form a false belief.
- So it was merely by luck that she came to hold a true belief. But can we have knowledge by luck? Intuitively, the answer is no.

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- After all, Mary is discovering *what time it is* in a situation that is not all that different from looking at **a broken clock**, for whenever she comes down the stairs the clock will always display “8:20 am”.
- However, one cannot know the time by looking at a device that ends up being the equivalent of a broken clock, even if as a result of that a true belief is formed.
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# Frankfurt counter-attack (Kelp 2016)

## Counter-argument:

- It is a crucial part of the case that the clock is functioning properly and is thus not stopped.
- So, we cannot appeal to the plausible idea that one cannot acquire knowledge from a stopped clock in order to argue that the epistemic Frankfurt case is not plausible.

## Reply:

- It is correct, for practical purposes, that clock of Harry is as if stopped.
- The clock always shows the time that Harry looks at her clock. It always shows 8:20 a.m.



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- However, for practical purposes, that clock of Mary is as if stopped.

- The clock is not stopped, but the time that Mary looks at the clock is not the time that she is looking at.

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In order to deal with the previous reply, Kelp (2016) proposes **another version of the epistemic Frankfurt case**:

- Mary's demon nemesis wants Mary to believe either that it is 8:20 or else that it is past 8:20. He has resolved that if Mary comes down before 8:20 he will set the clock to 8:20 and if he comes down at 8:20 or later, he will do nothing.
- Mary comes down at 8:20, the demon remains inactive, and Mary acquires a true belief by taking a competent reading from a perfectly functioning clock.

According to Kelp (2016):

- In that case there are knowledge, but without condition (SC).
- The clock is not stopped, nor is it manipulated.

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The reformulation of the epistemic Frankfurt case **is not particularly convincing** because:

- Until 8:20 that clock is for all effects like a clock stopped.
- Moreover, it is not clear that this new version presents a case, at least paradigmatic, of knowledge.
- After all, it is still *by luck* that Mary acquired that belief.

We can imagine a **Gettier case** with the same *structure*:

Thus, the new version of the epistemic Frankfurt-type case is **not decisive** for abandoning condition (SC).

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- E.g., suppose that in “Fake Barn” case (cf. Goldman 1976), Mary is not aware that she is looking precisely at the first real barn in an area where all the previous ones were mere facades of barns (i.e. structures which, viewed from the road, are indiscernible from real barns, but are false barns).

Thus, the new version of the epistemic Frankfurt-type case **is not decisive** for abandoning condition **(SC)**.

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- Until 8:20 that clock is for all effects like a clock stopped.
- Moreover, it is not clear that this new version presents a case, at least paradigmatic, of knowledge.
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