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Knowledge and practical reasoning

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plan

- 1. the classical conception of practical reasoning
- 2. the role of knowledge in practical reasoning
- 3. pragmatic encroachment
- 4. a critique of pragmatic encroachment

Theoretical vs practical reasoning

theoretical reasoning is reasoning from beliefs to beliefs, inferring beliefs from others and revising beliefs

practical reasoning, reasoning from intentions to intentions (plans) or to actions (decisions)

The classical conception of practical reasoning (Aristotle)

The practical syllogism (Nicomachean Ethics, De Motu Animalium)

1. Sweet things are good to eat (Major)
2. This is a sweet food (Minor)
3. Therefore it is good to eat (conclusion)

Two problems

The premisses entail the conclusion

In what sense ? Is the link deductive ?

The conclusion is an action

Or is it a proposition ? In which sense practical reasoning seems to be an instance of theoretical reasoning.

Are the premisses beliefs?

Aristotle says that the universal premiss (all things sweet are good) is an opinion (*Doxa*) [N.E.11147a 15-20]

But when he deals with the problem of incontinence or *akrasia* , he says that the akratic man is one who lacks *knowledge* of the premiss

The akratès does not know the premisses

- As for the suggestion that it is true opinion and not knowledge against which we act incontinently, that makes no difference to the argument; for some people when in a state of opinion do not hesitate, but think they know exactly. If, then, the notion is that owing to their weak conviction those who have opinion are more likely to act against their judgement than those who know, we answer that there need be no difference between knowledge and opinion in this respect; for some men are no less convinced of what they think than others of what they know; as is shown by the of Heraclitus. But (a), since we use the word 'know' in two senses (for both the man who has knowledge but is not using it and he who is using it are said to know), it will make a difference whether, when a man does what he should not, he has the knowledge but is not exercising it, or is exercising it; for the latter seems strange, but not the former.

The akratès has knowledge but does not use it

- the possession of knowledge in another sense than those just named is something that happens to men; for within the case of having knowledge but not using it we see a difference of state, admitting of the possibility of having knowledge in a sense and yet not having it, as in the instance of a man asleep, mad, or drunk. But now this is just the condition of men under the influence of passions; for outbursts of anger and sexual appetites and some other such passions, it is evident, actually alter our bodily condition, and in some men even produce fits of madness. It is plain, then, that incontinent people must be said to be in a similar condition to men asleep, mad, or drunk.

The revised conception of practical reasoning (the Hume Ramsey model)

the desire/ belief model (Hume, Ramsey, Davidson)

- 1. S desires that P
- 2. S believes that by doing A he will get P
- 3. S does A

- 3 characteristics of the belief/desire model

- a) the link between premises and conclusions is not inferential but causal (causal theory of action)) the premises are psychological states, with content, not proposition b)) the second premise do not express knowledge , but merely belief
- b) On the Hume-Ramsey model ,beliefs and desires are *causes* of action.
- c) Beliefs fall short of being knowledge; Beliefs are subjective probabilities attached to the probability of an event , desires express values of the agent.

The Davidsonian revision

- Premises are prima facie judgements ;
Practical reasoning is a form of inductive reasoning, not a form of deductive reasoning.

II. *The pragmatist challenge*

- On the revised Humean model belief and desires are *reasons* to act .They are practical reasons.
- Reasons to believe ,vs reasons to act .
Reasons to believe are epistemic or theoretical beliefs are warranted or certain or uncertain true or false

Two sorts of reasons

Reasons to believe vs reasons to want to believe. There can be pragmatic reasons to want to believe.

I want to believe that my husband is faithful. But this need not be a reason (epistemic) to believe that my wife is faithful.

Epistemic vs practical ought

- - If you have sufficient evidence for P then you ought to believe P
- - If you do not have evidence for P, then you ought not to believe that P
- But what about cases where I happen to believe that P for *other reasons* than evidential ?
- In such cases it seems that one ought not to believe that P. But is it the case?

(SP) Strong pragmatism

- = the view according to which the *prima facie* distinction between epistemic and practical reasons has no ultimate justification, and there are in fact only practical reasons,
- theoretical or epistemic reasons are reducible to practical ones,
 - theoretical rationality is a subspecies of practical rationality

(WP) Weak pragmatism

sometimes it happens that practical reasons for believing can override theoretical or epistemic reasons.

Such a view may not imply that there is one single and generic notion of reason which is ultimately practical, but it denies that it makes sense to distinguish strongly between theoretical or epistemic considerations when it comes to reasons for believing

Weak pragmatism

- “All things considered it can be rational for an individual to believe what is not epistemically rational for him to believe
“(Foley 1987: 214)
- On the WP view ordinary kind of reason for believing need not invariably generate a corresponding reason to believe the proposition

Example 1

you believe that you will get your degree if you pass the final exam, and that you believe this.

But the examiners, in order to teach you humility, will alter the exam to make it more difficult, if you come to believe that you will get the degree.

They can anticipate your beliefs. You are in bind, for you cannot believe what you have good evidence for without undermining this evidence.

In such a case, it seems reasonable *not* to believe what you have good evidence for.

Example 2

- your evidence that you will pass the exam is not stronger than your evidence that you will not pass it. But you know that if you believe that you will pass, this will increase your confidence and enhance your chances. In such a case belief against the evidence may create the evidence itself

-Ethics of belief issue :

- ought we to believe on the basis of relevant evidence, and if not could practical oughts override epistemic oughts?
- Cf. Pascal's Wager : can there be practical rational reasons to believe in God ?

Our ordinary reaction

- : there can be practical motivating reasons to believe something in addition to the epistemic reasons , reasons to want to believe something in addition to reasons to believe something
- but it is not clear that when we say that we have a good practical reason to believe something , the sense in which we have a reason to believe this thing is the same as the one in which we say that we have a good reason to believe something in the epistemic sense.

Pragmatism denies that epistemic reasons are necessary for rational belief

- The pragmatist denies this: There can be practical *normative* (as well as motivating or explanatory) reasons for belief , and the rationality of belief is not confined to epistemic or theoretical rationality

Prima facie objections to the pragmatist view

There is a series of asymmetries between epistemic or theoretical reasons on the one hand and practical reasons on the other hand, which show that the former cannot be reduced to the latter and that there is incommensurability between them

Unity of epistemic reasons vs plurality of practical reasons

- “Since believing is believing to be true, the only kind of reason one can have for believing – for feeling conviction, employing it as a premise in further thinking, and so on, is a reason for thinking it true. (Scanlon 1996: 35)

2. Wishful thinking is proper in practical reasoning in a way in which it is not proper in theoretical reasoning

My practical preference for going to Tokyo rather than to Kyoto gives me a reason to go to Tokyo rather than to Kyoto, but my preference for Tokyo does not give a theoretical reason to believe that I am on the road to Tokyo. Similarly, it can be appropriate to decide arbitrarily to go to Kyoto rather than to Kyoto when one is indifferent between both, but it is not appropriate to believe that this is the road to Tokyo rather than the road to Kyoto when one has no reason to believe either: in such a case one must rather suspend judgement

3. Failures of rationality in the practical case differ from failures of theoretical rationality

- Practical akrasia : acting deliberately against one's own best judgement
- Epistemic akrasia : believing against what one believes that one ought to believe ?
- Is that possible ?

4. Reasons that one has vs reasons for which one Φ s

(i) one can Φ while having a reason R to Φ ,

(ii) to Φ for reason R

(ex. I go to the opera while I have a reason to go to the opera, say meeting Anita, but I may not go to the opera for this reason)

In the case of actions (i) does not imply (ii)

In the case of belief epistemic reasons if there is a gap between (i) and (ii) my belief is irrational. It is not *based* or grounded on the appropriate reason

Evidentialism

- evidentialist conception of belief : S believes that p iff S has evidence for p (descriptive thesis)
- - evidentialism : S ought to believe that p only if S has evidence that p

Pragmatism about belief and knowledge

- **Pragmatism about justified belief**
- (JB) S is justified in believing that p only if S is justified to prefer as if p
- **Pragmatism about knowledge (or neo-pragmatism)**
- (KP) What makes someone's true belief a case of knowledge is partly determined by facts from the domain of practical rationality

III. The intuitive relation between knowledge and action

- On the belief/ desire model the rationality of an action is a matter of maximising expected utility. Only beliefs and desires enter the explanation . But intuition has it that knowledge plays a larger, perhaps essential role, in practical reasoning (as Aristotle anticipated see above)

knowledge explains action better than belief

- “A burglar spends all night ransacking a house, risking discovery by staying so long. We ask what features of the situation when he entered the house led to that result. A reasonable answer is that he knew that there was a diamond in the house. To say just that he believed truly that there was a diamond in the house would be to give a worse explanation, one whose explanans and explanandum are less closely connected. For one possibility consistent with the new explanans is that the burglar entered the house with a true belief that there was a diamond in it derived from false premises. For example, his only reason for believing that there was a diamond in the house might have been that someone told him that there was a diamond under the bed, when in fact the only diamond was in a drawer. He would then very likely have given up his true belief that there was a diamond in the house on discovering the falsity of his belief that there was a diamond under the bed, and abandoned the search. In contrast, if he *knew* that there was a diamond in the house, his knowledge was not essentially based on a false premise. Given suitable background conditions, the probability of his ransacking the house all night, conditional on his having entered it believing truly but not knowing that there was a diamond in it, will be lower than the probability of his ransacking it all night, conditional on his having entered it knowing that there was a diamond in it. It follows that the probability of his ransacking the house all night, conditional on his having entered it believing truly that there was a diamond in it, is lower than the probability of his ransacking it all night, conditional on his having entered it knowing that there was a diamond in it. In this case, the substitution of ‘believe truly’ for ‘know’ weakens the explanation, by lowering the probability of the explanandum conditional on the explanans. The substitution of ‘believe’ without ‘truly’ for ‘know’ would do even worse.” (Williamson 2000: 62)

Blame , excuses

you ought not have done X, since you did not know that P (example: looking for a restaurant, doctor who uses a needle which he does not know to be safe, parents who let a child play with a dog which they do not know to be dangerous)

Lotteries

I will lose the lottery

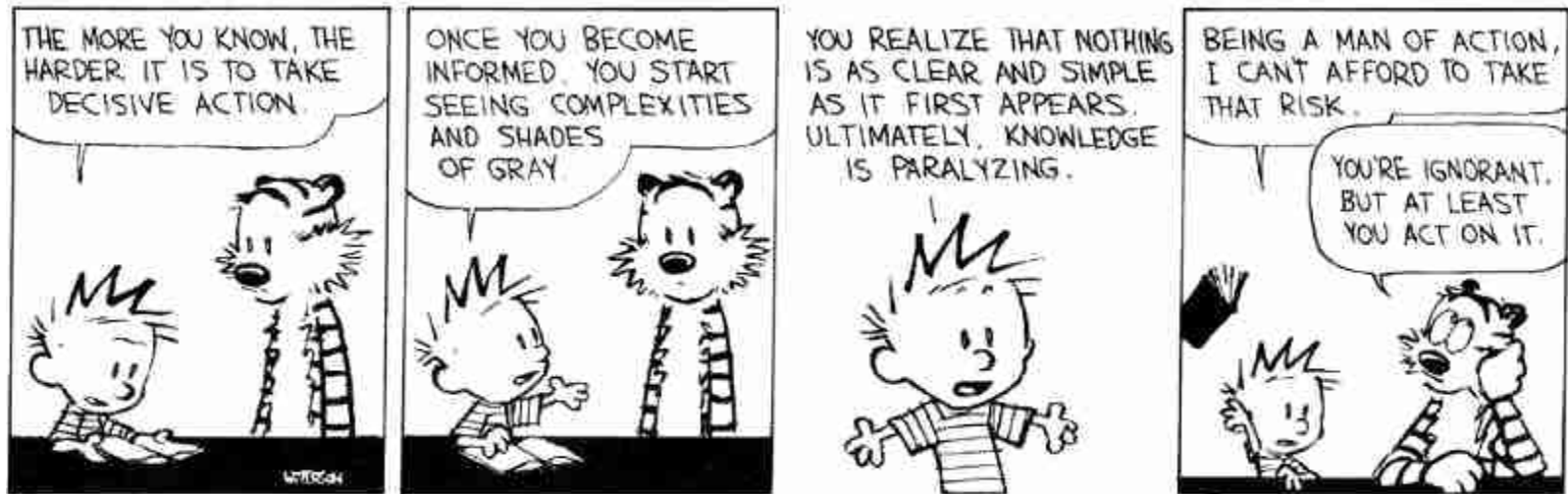
If I keep my ticket, I'll get nothing

If I sell my ticket I'll get 1 dollar

So I ought to sell my ticket

This reasoning is unacceptable because the agent is not entitled to assert the first premise, since he does not *know* that it is true before the winning ticket is drawn. By contrast if the person has just heard the winning number, seen it was not his, and sold the ticket to someone else unaware of the announcement, we would not criticize the reasoning. This shows that “if the question whether p is practically relevant, it is acceptable to use the premise that p in one deliberations if one knows it and (at least in very many cases) unacceptable if one does not know it” (Hawthorne 2004)

IV Pragmatic encroachment



Pragmatism about knowledge

(KP) What makes someone's true belief a case of knowledge is partly determined by facts from the domain of practical rationality

KP attacks

“Intellectualism” : epistemic reasons are different from practical reasons. Knowledge not a matter of practical interests

Train example

(de Rose, Fantl and cgrath 2002)

- Case 1. You want to know whether the approaching train from Boston to Providence stops in the intermediate stop in Foxboro or whether it is an express. It does not matter very much to you whether it is the express or not, although you mildly prefer it was. You ask a guy waiting for the train, and he says that the train does stop in Foxboro. You believe him.
- Case 2. You have the same evidence as in Case 1. But here it is very important for you to be in Foxboro, since you are going to have there an interview on which your career depends. You overhear someone say that the train stops in Foxboro. But you think “that information might be wrong, I have to check further.”

Pragmatic encroachment

- According to Fantl and McGrath our intuition is that in case 1, you have good enough evidence to know that the train stops at Foxboro, whereas in case 2 you do not have enough evidence to know that the train stops at Foxboro. The difference is due to the fact that not much is at stake in case 1, whereas a lot is at stake in Case 2, *although in both cases you have the same evidence*.
- In case 1, you are rational to prefer to board the train without inquiring further (A) to boarding the train an inquiring (B) , given that the train stops at Foxboro (p), because B would involve a cost (spending time to inquire and risking to miss the train). In case 2, the preference is the reverse.

pragmatic condition upon knowledge:

- (1) S knows that p .
- (2) S is rational to prefer A to B
given p (A & p to B & p)
- Therefore, (3) S is rational to prefer A to B
in fact.

Neo-pragmatism

- Practical interests do not affect the degree of confidence that an agent has in the truth of a proposition, but whether these degrees of confidence amount to belief.

pragmatic conditions on knowledge

- (KPR) For any act A , if X knows that if p , then A is the best thing to do, then S is rational to do A
- **(PR) If S knows that p , then S is justified in using p as a premise in practical reasoning**

A much stronger principle

- there is a necessary pragmatic condition on knowledge
- **(PCK) S knows that p only if S is rational to act as if p**

V. Can pragmatic encroachment justify the pragmatist thesis ?

According to the pragmatic encroachment view, evidentialism is false

- (E) For any two subjects S and S' , necessarily, if S and S' have the same
- evidence for/against p , then S is justified in believing that p iff S' is, too.

My own intuition

- the individual is case 1 and in case 2 has exactly the same justification because they have the same evidence (the testimony of another traveller in the station to the effect that the train stops at Foxboro). The fact that more is at stake in the second case does not seem to me to show that the individual is less epistemically justified – in the sense of having the same evidence for his justification- in the second case than in the first. Now, one may reply to this that although the two individuals in each case are equally justified, they are not justified *in the sense required for their knowledge*.

counterfactual evidence

- Their point is that the weight imposed by the stakes elevates the amount of epistemic justification which is required for knowledge. Justification in this sense does not simply rest upon the evidence that one has at a given time, but also upon the evidence that one *might* have at a later time or at another time in general, if circumstances required that one should reconsider one's earlier evidence. Let us call *justification** - or *enlarged justification* - this kind of justification, and let us call *counterfactual evidence* or *evidence** the evidence that one *would* need to have if the stakes were higher .

problem for the pragmatic encroacher

- The reasoning above then purports to show that although justification in the evidentialist sense of (E) can be exactly the same, justification* is not. Now one can certainly grant this, and if one understands the intuitions voiced in the train cases as showing a difference in justification*, we can certainly agree with *this* sense of pragmatic encroachment. But the problem is precisely whether this is a pragmatic encroachment on (evidential) justification or upon justification*. And it seems to simply beg the question to assume that the two notions of justification (and of evidence) are equivalent. It seems to me that what happens in the train cases is that the cost of information is more salient in case 2 than in case one, and that it is more important to be justified about p in case 2 than in case 1. But the fact that it is more important, practically or pragmatically or prudentially, to be justified does not mean that we are more or less justified depending upon the stakes. The fact that we can say, that one is not justified* to believe that p when the stakes on believing that p affect importantly one's preferences and the consequences of one's actions does not imply that one is not justified *simpliciter* in the straightforward evidentialist sense

same evidence

- But even if our intuitions were correct, and if we recognised that the individual in case 1 is justified to believe that p whereas he is not justified in the second case, it would remain to be shown that the difference in justification is due to the “pragmatic” factor in question. It is not. Up to now I have not considered the formulation of the problem in terms of degrees of belief. If we suppose that degrees of belief reflect the degree of confidence that one can have towards a proposition, given a certain amount of evidence, by hypothesis, in the train cases 1 and 2, there is no reason to suppose that the individual has a different degree of belief in situation 2 than he or she has in situation 1. By definition she has the same evidence, and she should therefore believe exactly to the same degree that the train stops at Foxboro. So what explains that one can have the intuition that our subject is “more justified” in case 1 than in case 2 ? What explains our intuition that there is a difference is of course that the evidence that is needed for believing that the trains stop at Foxboro is greater in case 2 than in case 1, because of what is practically at stake.

- The difference between justification (in the strict evidentialist sense) and justification* or enlarged justification in what we may call the pragmatic sense is that in this second we are much more reluctant to attribute *knowledge*. What is happening in fact in the train cases is that in the second case we consider that although the subject has justification he does not have knowledge. In Stanley's terms (2005: 88), the greater the practical investment one has in a belief, the stronger one's evidence must be in order to *know it*" [*my italics*]. Stanley, as we shall see in the next section, talks explicitly of knowledge in such cases, not of justification. The problem with the reasoning above is that when the stakes are high, we lose grip on how much justification is needed for having knowledge. We are thus in a familiar situation: if on the one hand we raise too high the requirements for justification in order for it to amount to knowledge, we run the risk of scepticism, and if, on the other hand, we accept fallibilism we do not ensure knowledge.

- So the argument above is much more credible because the state ascribed to the subject is the state of knowing, than the reasoning which ascribes justification. If what is ascribed is justification* (i.e enough justification to yield knowledge), the reasoning is much more appealing. But we should not equivocate between the two notions of justification and the two notions of evidence. In any case, from the fact that one's evidence* must be stronger, or that one needs to look for more counterfactual evidence than one has in case 2 than in case 1, it does not follow that one *has* more evidence in the first case than in the second.

- What seems to happen, in the cases about justification* that Fantl and McGrath discuss is this. The practical significance of the truth of a proposition does *not* affect the (evidential) justification of the subject, although it does affect our *attribution* of knowledge, and our judgement about the amount of justification needed for knowledge. There are pragmatic limitations on the collection of evidence, but it does not imply that evidentialism is false. This does not amount to a pragmatic conception of justification. David Owens makes the point quite well in describing the pragmatic limitations of collecting evidence:

- “Practical considerations determine whether we should form a view about the truth of p but given that we want a belief on the matter, evidence alone determines whether we ought to believe or believe not p . Here the pragmatist is claiming that we should form a belief about whether p just in case the costs of having such a belief are outweighed by the benefits. On this view, belief formation is an activity constrained by the state of evidence – it wouldn’t count as an act of belief formation unless it reflected how we perceive the balance of evidence (just as certain words don’t count as a sincere assertion that p unless p is believed) but, being governed by practical norms, it is something we do nevertheless.” (Owens 2000: 31)

- The pragmatism about justification has nothing to do with whether *evidence* counts as justification of a belief. It has to do with whether we *form* a belief or not depending on the cost of doing so. In the train case, the subject in has exactly the same evidence, but in the second case unlike in the first he cares very much about how he should form his belief. This has nothing to do with the falsity of evidentialism. It has to do with whether he should form an opinion or not, or make a corresponding assertion

That does not imply that knowledge does not count for practical reasoning

- None of this shows that (PR) is false . (P R) is correct but in the straightforward evidentialist sense, not in the pragmatist one.

Conclusion

None of the arguments for pragmatic encroachment of epistemic notions such as truth, evidence, justification and knowledge show that purism, or intellectualist, defined as the view “that knowledge is not a matter of practical facts” (Stanley 2005: 6) work. They do not show, contrary to what they announce, that evidentialism is false