

Knowledge and action

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PHLB20 Lecture Notes 3

A problem many people in contemporary epistemology hope to answer:

What is knowledge good for? You might think that if someone's belief is true—if it isn't a mistake that might come back and bite them—that would be enough for any purposes one might have. But knowledge is more than true belief. Why do we want this additional increment?

We discussed Hawthorne and Stanley's paper 'Knowledge and action', in which they try to answer this question.

1 H&S's view

They advance two principles:

The action-knowledge principle

Treat the proposition that P as a reason for acting only if you know that P .

The reason-knowledge principle

Where one's choice is P -dependent, it is appropriate to treat the proposition that P as a reason for acting iff you know that P .

Another way to put the 'action-knowledge principle' is 'it is appropriate to treat the proposition that P as a reason for acting only if one knows that P '.

Notice the first of these is an 'only if', while the second is an 'iff'. The first one doesn't say that you have to treat every proposition you know as a reason for acting.

Let's unpack some terminology:

- Here's an example where '**one treats the proposition that P as a reason for A-ing**': one treats the proposition that Burger King is on the other side as a reason for crossing the street.

What they mean here is that one's hypothetical answer to the question 'why did you cross the street?' would include 'Burger King is on the other side'.

- When they say '**one's choice is P -dependent**' is that it makes a difference to which option one chooses if P is true or not.

This qualification is intended to get them the 'iff': it is not appropriate to treat 'Lhasa is in Tibet' as a reason for crossing the street because it does not matter for whether one should cross the street whether Lhasa is in Tibet.

- By '**appropriate**' they mean 'OK' or 'permitted'. They don't mean 'mandatory'.

The action-knowledge principle provides a test for when it is *not* OK to treat P as a reason for acting: if you don't know that P , it's not OK. It says nothing about when it *is* OK.

The reason-knowledge principle provides a partial criterion for when it is OK to treat P as a reason for acting: it is restricted to the cases when one's choice is P -dependent. The principle then says that in such cases, the circumstances when it is OK to treat P as a reason for acting are exactly those in which one knows that P . This principle says nothing about when one *must* treat P as a reason for acting. It also says nothing about circumstances when one's choice is not P -dependent.

The action-knowledge principle says exactly that one makes a mistake in the following circumstances: one treats P as a reason for acting and one does not know that P .

The reason-knowledge principle says exactly that (A) one makes a mistake if that happens *and moreover* one's choice is P -dependent [note that it does not say that one makes a mistake if: (i) one treats P as a reason for acting and (ii) one does not know that P and (iii) one's choice is not P -dependent] and (B) one does not make a mistake if one's choice is P dependent and one knows that P and one treats P as a reason for acting.

2 The first-person action-knowledge principle

- It is appropriate for me to treat P as a reason for acting only if I know that P .

From the first-person, we treat fact and knowledge as equivalent: affirming P commits me to affirming that I know that P and vice versa.

Now, 'treating P as a reason for acting' is answering a certain hypothetical question by affirming P . So whenever I treat P as a reason for acting, I affirm that I know that P .

So I can never find myself to be in violation of either of H&S's principles. **When understood as first-person directives, H&S's principles have no content about what I should not do.**

3 The third-person action-knowledge principle

- It is appropriate for Sam to treat *P* as a reason for acting only if Sam knows that *P*.

Now, ‘treating *P* as a reason for acting’ is answering a certain hypothetical question by affirming *P*. So the thought is that Sam should not affirm *P* in this special context unless Sam knows that *P*.

The following principle might follow from our logic of knowledge:

The belief-knowledge principle

It is appropriate for Sam to affirm (namely, believe) that *P* only if Sam knows that *P*.

Everyone should believe only what they know!, this principle says.

Is it true? Well, since truth and knowledge are equivalent from the first-person, if Sam believes that *P* she believes she knows that *P*. If she doesn’t know that *P*, then this belief is a mistake.

So if someone believes something they do not know, they have made at least one mistake.

Maybe this shows that the belief-knowledge principle is true. It all depends on what is meant by ‘appropriate’. If there is something you can’t do without making at least one mistake, then maybe that is a sense in which it is not appropriate to do it.

Now notice that the action-knowledge principle is a trivial consequence of the belief-knowledge principle. If so, then the action-knowledge principle is a trivial consequence of the belief-knowledge principle.

So if it is inappropriate to do something that can’t be done without making at least one mistake, the action-knowledge principle is a trivial consequence of our logic of knowledge.

4 Why H&S endorse their principles

That is one argument, but it is not the one they give.

Their argument is an ‘inference to the best explanation’ (IBE). They lay out some *data*; ask *why*; canvas a range of *alternative answers*; argue that theirs is *superior*; and on this basis, *endorse it*. Out of all the answers to ‘why this data?’—all the explanations of the data—theirs is the best (they claim); so we should ‘infer to it’ or *endorse it on the grounds that it is the best explanation*.

4.1 Their data

1. *The lottery ticket* A reasons: this ticket for \$5 million has a chance in a million that it will win; therefore it won’t win; therefore I will throw it out. A throws it out: A shouldn’t have done that.

2. *The germophobe* B believes his hands are dirty even though he knows he has washed them sufficiently well to remove all dirt. B reasons: my hands are dirty; therefore I should wash them. B washes his hands: B shouldn’t have done that.

3. *The war survivor* Hannah searches high and low for Mordechai, still lost after five years at war. Hannah reasons: Mordechai is dead; therefore I can remarry. Hannah remarries. The next day, Mordechai returns: Hannah shouldn’t have remarried.

4.2 Their question

Why shouldn’t have A thrown out the ticket, B washed his hands, and Hannah remarried?

4.3 A range of answers

The action-belief principle

Treat the proposition that *P* as a reason for acting only if you believe that *P*.

The action-truth principle

Treat the proposition that *P* as a reason for acting only if *P*.

The action-true belief principle

Treat the proposition that *P* as a reason for acting only if *P* and you believe that *P*.

The action-justified belief principle

Treat the proposition that *P* as a reason for acting only if *P* and you are justified in believing that *P*.

The action-justified true belief principle

Treat the proposition that *P* as a reason for acting only if *P* and you are justified in believing that *P*.

4.4 Testing the answers

- The action-knowledge principle gives the answers they like on all three data points;
- On case (1), they claim that all competitors give the wrong answer;
- On case (2), they claim the action-belief principle gives the wrong answer;
- On case (3), they claim the action-justified belief principle (and hence the action-belief principle) gives the wrong answer.

Notice that the action-truth, action-true belief, and action-justified true belief principles are only problematic on case (1). Both of them explain cases (2) and (3): the hands *aren't* dirty, and Mordechai *isn't* dead.

So the lottery case is carrying all the weight against the claim that a reason for action just has to be true.

5 Problems

1. In case (1), *A* is already doing something irrational. *A* shouldn't reason from 'this has a low probability' to 'this won't happen'. Belief that something is possible but unlikely is *incompatible* with certainty that it will not occur.

For this reason, the action-knowledge principle has no advantage over the action-justified true belief principle.

2. Case (3) is fairly crazy. *Mordechai* of course thinks *Hannah* shouldn't have remarried, and it is of course in a sense tragic that she did. But I don't understand the sense in which *Hannah* didn't have good reasons to remarry. The powerful emotional content of this case seems to render unavailable a clear focus on the notion of a reason H&S are working with.
3. Case (2) has a problem similar to case (1). Clearly *B* in some sense does believe his hands are dirty but also in some sense does not. *B* is already unreasonable.

4. Recall Sue the diamond-sorter. (She randomly picked the one real diamond out of a bag of extremely realistic fakes.)

Suppose that following standard practices she estimates the value of the bag of diamonds by multiplying her assessed value of a sample diamond by the number of items in its set.

She reasons: this stone is worth \$3000; there are twenty stones in the bag; therefore I should report the value of the total bag as \$60,000. She does issue that report.

Now, for Sue, 'this stone is worth \$3000' is among her reasons for issuing the report of the value of the bag at \$60,000.

We can sometimes think that Sue does not know that the stone is worth \$3000, even though she has a justified true belief that it is. According to the action-knowledge principle, we should then think that Sue should not have used this as a reason for issuing the report she issued, that Sue was wrong to issue the report.

Is that plausible? Of course her report is false. But H&S intend by their action-knowledge principle that someone who treats *P* as a reason for action when they do not know that *P* is somehow unreasonable. I for one do not have a sufficiently strong grip on their notion of what is reasonable to be able to evaluate this claim.

6 Verdict

1. Understood as first-person directives, H&S's principles are trivial;
2. Understood as third-person directives, H&S's principles may be trivial consequences of the logic of knowledge;
3. Otherwise their IBE argument provides no reason to accept their principles over related 'true belief' principles;
4. And where the rubber hits the road, in the Diamond Sue case, their principles make a prediction that is hard to make any sense of;
5. So the only reason to accept their view comes from our view.