Knowledge – Action Links
Jason Stanley
Handout 1

I. Knowledge Norms for Action

The topic of the seminar is “knowledge action principles”. It intersects with the discussion of knowledge first epistemology initiated by Timothy Williamson’s 2000 work, Knowledge and Its Limits. Knowledge first epistemology has led to a discussion of knowledge norms for action, which are one kind of knowledge – action link.

One aspect of knowledge first epistemology (but not the only aspect) is that knowledge is a theoretically central epistemic concept, more central for example than belief. Where there are epistemic norms, the most central norms invoke knowledge. Rational action, practical reasoning, intentional action, and skilled action all plausibly involve epistemic norms. Defending knowledge norms for action involves arguing that relevant epistemic notion for the norms in one or more of these cases is knowledge.

In Knowledge and Its Limits, Williamson argues that it is a norm on practical reasoning that its premises must be known; this formulation survives intact through John Hawthorne’s 2005 book, Knowledge and Lotteries. A plausible interpretation of “premises in practical reasoning” is that they are motivating reasons for action; the reasons that one, in some difficult to elucidate sense, considers before, or in, acting (for an extensive defense of this interpretation, see Kieran Setiya’s 2014 paper, “What is a Reason to Act?”). On this interpretation of “premises in practical reasoning”, the norm that states that premises in practical reasoning must be known is another way of saying that one can treat a proposition as a reason for acting if and if it is known. This is the principle explicitly defended in John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley’s “Knowledge and Action” (2008).

Aidan McGlynn has pointed out that on some such conceptions of the practical syllogism, it contains premises that are not plausibly regarded as reasons for action (McGlynn cites Jonathan Dancy here). If so, then the formulation in terms of a knowledge norm on premises in practical reasoning is a stronger and more controversial requirement than the formulation in terms of reasons.

In Matthew Benton’s rich article in the Internet Encyclopedia on Knowledge Norms, he discusses the knowledge norm of assertion, the knowledge norm of action, and the knowledge norm of belief. These are three literatures in which the dialectic initiated by knowledge first epistemology flourishes. In each case, there are proponents of epistemic norms that are, for the most part, weaker than knowledge (for action, for assertion, for

---

1 See also Jonathan Way, “Reasons as Premises of Good Reasoning”, Pacific Philosophical Quarterly (forthcoming).
2 http://www.iep.utm.edu/kn-norms/
belief). For example, in her paper “Norms of Assertion”, Jennifer Lackey argues for a “reasonable to believe” norm of assertion (indeed, Lackey’s 2007 paper provides the classic template for these debates, as it pits knowledge against reasonable belief as the relevant epistemic norm). We will see a similar structure in the debate about the knowledge norm of action; for example Ram Neta’s “Treating Something as a Reason for Action” advances an epistemic norm apparently weaker than knowledge but more demanding than justified belief.

Those interested in the topic of the relative explanatory priority of knowledge and justification, or knowledge and belief, will all have stakes in debates about epistemic norms for action, for assertion, and for belief. But the debates nevertheless have dissimilarities.

Let’s consider the relation between the debate about knowledge norms of assertion and the debate about knowledge norms of action. Moore’s Paradox makes the case for the existence of epistemic norms for assertion. Moore’s Paradox can be stated in terms of belief or knowledge (G.E. Moore chose the latter). It is odd to say, “p, but I don’t believe that p” and equally odd to say, “p, but I don’t know that p”. But if the epistemic norm for assertion were merely belief, one could explain the first version of Moore’s paradox, but not the second. In contrast, if the epistemic norm for assertion were knowledge, one could explain both. The case of assertion is an example that Williamson explores in a chapter of Knowledge and its Limits (henceforth KAIL), where he defends the thesis that the constitutive norm for assertion is “assert only what one knows”. In Knowledge and Its Limits, Williamson does endorse the principle that premises in practical reasoning must be known. But there is less discussion in the book about the nature or justification of the claim than there is in the case of assertion.

There are dissimilarities in the two cases. One difference concerns the nature of the norm. Assertion is a speech act, and there is a good case to be made that there is a constitutive feature that makes an act an assertion. In contrast, the claim that premises in practical reasoning must be known does not at least obviously express a constitutive feature of an act (even of reasoning). Another difference between a knowledge norm for assertion and a knowledge norm for action is relevant to their defense. As we shall see when we discuss Jessica Brown, one way of criticizing such norms is by appeal to counterexamples; e.g. cases in which the assertion seems perfectly in order despite the fact that the norm has not been obeyed (Jennifer Lackey and Jessica Brown have the most compelling such cases). The advocate of the knowledge norm for assertion has more

---

3 An exception is my 2008 paper, “Knowledge and Certainty”, in which I argue for a certainty norm of assertion. This is one of those papers however in which the author doesn’t believe the conclusion. At the time, I was sort of thinking of it as a reductio of the methodology of relying too heavily on arguments from Moore’s Paradox.

4 It should not be inferred from this that Williamson is less interested in the connections between knowledge and action than the connections between knowledge and assertion; after all, the very first section of KaiL is called “Knowing and Acting”. 
latitude in arguing that such cases are instances in which making the assertion despite the violating the norm is the right action, because asserting in the cases at hand is overall the right act, given other considerations. This is a more difficult response strategy to take for the advocate of a knowledge norm for action, as there is no more general category of action than action itself.

II. Principles relating knowledge and rational action

In their classic 2002 paper “Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification”, Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath defend the principle:

\[(P1) \text{ If you know that } p, \text{ then it shouldn’t be a problem to act as if } p.\]

Fantl and McGrath then use this principle to motivate a similar claim about justification. Their goal is not to argue for the centrality of knowledge, but rather to argue against evidentialism, which they state as:

Evidentialism: 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 pp iff S’ is too.

The structure of their argument against evidentialism appeals to the knowledge and justification principles that link these properties to rational action. It is uncontroversial that what one ought to do depends upon how much is at stake, or one’s interests. Given (P1), they are able then to move between claims that depend upon what is at stake (claims about what it is rational for an agent to do) and knowledge in a way that falsified Evidentialism.\(^5\)

It’s clear that Fantl and McGrath are not influenced in this paper by knowledge-first epistemology, and indeed come to the debate from a different set of considerations. The starting point is the set of intuitions that have been made famous by the work of Stewart Cohen and Keith DeRose, namely the intuitions that motivate contextualism. Taken at face value, these intuitions straightforwardly suggest that knowledge depends upon what is at stake. One way of looking at the dialectic is that contextualists assume the truth of evidentialism, and conclude that epistemic vocabulary is context-sensitive. Fantl and McGrath’s 2002 paper, as well as my 2005 book, is motivated by the desire to take the intuitions motivating contextualism at face-value.

It bears mentioning (thanks to Dan Greco for reminding me) that the view that knowledge depends in part on stakes or interests does not yield a full account of the intuitions motivating contextualism. Contextualists have been motivated in large part by the desire to give contextualist responses to the problem of skepticism. The “ordinary” cases, such as DeRose’s bank cases or Cohen’s airport cases, are intended to initially motivate the contextualist program. I have argued (Knowledge and Practical Interests, pp. 125-30; Knowledge and Practical Interests (pp. 181ff.), I defend evidentialism on the grounds that evidence is also interest-sensitive.)
henceforth KaPL), there is no parallel account of skeptical scenarios that is available to the theorist who thinks the “ordinary” cases instead reveal dependence on interests or stakes. On the other hand, as I also point on in those pages, contextualists recognize that some skeptical scenarios cannot be treated via the machinery of contextualism. For example, in “Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons, Stewart Cohen argues that it is a priori rational to believe that I have some evidence that I am not a brain in a vat. There are also a class of ordinary cases that the contextualist is able to treat with her machinery, but defy an explanation in terms of the interest-dependence of knowledge (what I call “High Attributor – Low Subject Stakes” cases in KaPL). The existence of high-attributor – low subject stakes cases have led Fantl and McGrath to embrace both the interest-dependence of knowledge and contextualism about knowledge attributions.

It’s worth emphasizing that the link between knowledge and action in Fantl and McGrath (2002) is not a knowledge norm on action. It is not a norm on reasons for acting, or premises on practical reasoning. Indeed, it doesn’t have the form of a norm at all. It is rather a claim about the relation between knowing something and doing the most rational action. It is therefore an example of a link between knowledge and action that is in no way a knowledge involving norm. Fantl and McGrath use this principle in explanation (of various intuitions) in a way that parallels the way that people like me use knowledge norms in explanation. This fact masks the very different character of the principles. In later work (e.g. Fantl and McGrath 2009, chapter 3) they present their view in terms knowledge norms, without much or indeed any discussion about the change.

There is a rich literature on norms for rational action, that is, the literature on Bayesian decision theory. There are important questions about the link between knowledge – action principles and the norms for rational action of Bayesian decision theory, e.g. expected utility maximization. Principles that connect knowledge directly to rational action in effect add an additional element to the mix in determining whether or not an action satisfies the aims of rationality. In contrast, norms governing reasons for action do not add an additional constraint on what makes an action rational. One can do what one ought to do, but have the wrong reason for so doing. Knowledge norms about reasons for action therefore do not obviously conflict with Bayesian decision theory (see Hawthorne and Stanley (2008)). However, some prominent contributions to the debate have taken the form of arguments for Bayesian decision theory’s norms on rational action, as against knowledge norms (such as Igor Douven’s 2008 paper, “Knowledge and Practical Reasoning”).

III. Metaphysical claims connecting knowledge and action

In his 1999 paper, “How Knowledge Works, John Hyman argues that p is A’s reason for doing something only if A knows that p. This claim is not a proposed norm on reasons for action. It is rather an identification - something just isn’t someone’s reason for action unless it is known by that person. A similar claim about what it is for a proposition to be a reason for someone is advanced by Peter Unger, in his classic book Ignorance. No
doubt, this metaphysical view can be used to explain a number of intuitions that knowledge norms for action have also been used to explain. But this view is not a proposed norm.

Though there are overlaps in explanatory power, the metaphysical view that having a reason is having a knowledge state differs from knowledge norms for action in certain cases. Acting on a proposition that is not known is just not acting on the basis of reasons, if the metaphysical view is correct. In contrast, many such cases count as acting on the basis of reasons, from the perspective of the advocate of knowledge norms. But these are cases of acting improperly, by violating the norm.

In a forthcoming paper with Timothy Williamson, “Skill”, we propose an analysis of skill. Specifically, we argue that skills are dispositions to know. We also defend the following principle about skilled action:

**Guidance**: Any skilled action is guided by knowledge that manifests possession of that skill.

This claim too is not a proposed norm on skilled action. It is rather a claim about what it is for a particular action to be an instance of skill.

In a previous paper, “Knowing How”, Stanley and Williamson defend the following thesis about intentional action:

(1) If A is doing F intentionally, then A is thereby employing A’s knowledge how to F.

This is a claim about intentional action, and it is presented as a claim about its nature. One can imagine a similar principle that is rather in the form of a norm for intentional action:

(2) If F-ing is an intentional action, then if one Fs, one should employ one’s knowledge how to F.

According to this principle, knowing how is the norm of intending.6

In his 2008 paper, “Practical Knowledge”, Kieran Setiya defends a principle in the spirit of (1), but somewhat more complicated, namely:

(K) If A is doing f intentionally, A knows how to f, or else he is doing it by doing other things that he knows how to do.

6 I’m not quite sure which of (1) and (2) Stanley and Williamson (2001) had in mind in their discussion. And I was there!
As with (1), this is a claim that connects knowledge and action, and so is a knowledge – action principle (though Setiya argues that knowing how is not propositional knowledge). But it is not a knowledge norm.

IV. Summing up

In sum, a seminar on knowledge – action principles would cover a lot of territory, and not just knowledge norms for action. The topic of knowledge norms is one that, at least in the contemporary literature, emerges from the knowledge first agenda, which involves arguing that knowledge is the most conceptually and/or explanatorily central epistemic norm. The debate about knowledge norms takes the form of contributions to the topic of assertion, action, belief, or what have you. But it should not forgotten that these debates are also about the centrality of the concept of knowledge, and whether for example justified belief is the more central epistemic norm.

The current debate about knowledge norms has, as one source, the knowledge first program initiated by Williamson in KAIL. As we have seen, a second source is the literature on contextualism, specifically the intuitions that suggest that knowledge is interest or stakes dependent. Principles connecting knowledge to action have played roles in these debates, as they have been taken to provide foundational justifications for the intuitions, and reasons against dismissing them or accounting for them via context-sensitivity.