

Knowledge and Practical Interests, by Jason Stanley. Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp xi + 191.

In this hard-hitting book, Jason Stanley combats the widely held assumption that the factors in virtue of which a true belief amounts to knowledge are exclusively “truth-conducive, in the sense that their existence makes the belief more likely to be true, either objectively or from the point of view of the subject” (1); he labels this view “intellectualism.” Stanley’s main thesis is that whether a belief constitutes knowledge instead depends in part on such non-truth-conducive, “practical” matters as the cost (to the subject) of being wrong.

This is the latest of several recent notable explorations and defences of the position that has come to be known as “subject-sensitive invariantism,” but that Stanley prefers to call “interest-relative invariantism” (IRI); see also Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath’s ‘Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification’ (Philosophical Review 111 (2002): 67-94); Stanley’s own precursor to the present book, ‘On the Linguistic Basis for Contextualism’ (Philosophical Studies 119 (2004): 119-146); and John Hawthorne’s Knowledge and Lotteries (Oxford University Press, 2004).

In the Introduction, Stanley makes a prima facie case for his anti-intellectualism by exploiting a series of cases (pp. 3-5) that seem to show that knowledge does depend on practical matters, because some of the cases elicit opposite intuitions from one another on the issue of whether the speaker in the examples is right to attribute knowledge to the relevant subject (or to deny that she knows), though the cases differ from one another only with respect to practical, non-truth-conducive matters. I should note that my intuition about the third of the five cases is the opposite of what Stanley reports: the key knowledge attribution in that case seems to me true. Stanley’s examples are interesting variations of cases long used by defenders of contextualism to support their view. Indeed, many seem to think of contextualists as rejecting what Stanley calls intellectualism. But Stanley astutely sees that contextualism results from accommodating various intuitions like those elicited by some such examples, while upholding intellectualism (esp. 2-3). It’s precisely because the contextualist holds fast to the intellectualist assumption that the truth of a given proposition ascribing knowledge to a subject can’t depend on practical, non-truth-conducive matters that he is led to posit that different knowledge relations are denoted in some of the cases in

question. For the contextualist, exactly which proposition gets expressed by a knowledge-ascribing sentence will often depend on “practical” factors, but the particular proposition that does get expressed will not itself be at all about those factors. On Stanley’s view, by contrast, the same proposition gets expressed no matter how the practical facts are arrayed, but the truth-conditions of that proposition are such that whether they are satisfied depends on the practical, as well as on the truth-conducive, facts of the situation. Roughly, whereas on contextualism a knowledge attribution expresses that a subject (has a true belief and) meets such-and-such epistemic standards, where exactly which standards are invoked can depend on practical factors, on views like Stanley’s it expresses the thought that the subject (has a true belief and) meets the epistemic standards that are appropriate to her practical situation – and, of course, whether that thought is true depends in part on what the subject’s practical situation is.

Much of this book consists of a critique of contextualism, the main competition for IRI views like Stanley’s. The contextualist approach is explained in Chapter 1, and then attacked in Chapters 2-4. Stanley develops his anti-intellectualist alternative, IRI, in Chapter 5. In Ch. 6, Stanley critically compares the two views, arguing for the superiority of IRI. In Chapter 7, he argues for the superiority of IRI over another rival: “relativism” – a type of view most prominently advocated in recent work by John MacFarlane (see “The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions,” Oxford Studies in Epistemology 1 (2005): 197-233). Stanley concludes in Chapter 8 with some interesting thoughts about contextualism and interest-relativism as general types of strategies for addressing various philosophical problems.

This book is packed with arguments, both offensive and defensive, so my critical discussion in this brief review will have to be very limited. The least successful aspect of Stanley’s case, in my view, are his attempts to deal with what seem to me the two main problems afflicting views like his. One of those problems is the trouble these views have with some third-person knowledge attributions. (See, for instance, pp. 183-187 of my “The Ordinary Language Basis for Contextualism and the New Invariantism,” The Philosophical Quarterly 55 (2005): 172-198, where I press this problem.) But I will have to address Stanley’s interesting new move in response to this problem (100-101) elsewhere, and move on to the IRI’s second pressing problem.

Though Stanley often writes of the “intuitions” he seeks to do justice to, he labels the intellectualist thought that knowledge does not depend on practical matters an “assumption.” But that, too, is a fairly powerful intuition. (It is no accident that this thesis is so widely

assumed.) The power of the intellectualist intuition perhaps becomes most apparent when we consider certain temporal and modal claims much like some claims that Stanley seeks to address – claims to the effect that matters were/will be/would have been different with regard to whether a subject knows some fact when/if such-and-such was/will be/had been the case, where the difference in circumstances being imagined between the current, actual situation and the other situation being discussed concerns only some practical matter: “She doesn’t know, but she would have known if less had been at stake”, “She doesn’t know now, but she will know tomorrow, when less will be at stake”, “She knows on the weekends when she isn’t on duty and is only wondering out of idle curiosity; but on weekdays, when much rides on whether she’s right, she doesn’t know.” Where there is no difference at all in any truth-conducive factors to ground the differences in knowledge alleged in these sentences (if, for instance, there’s no difference in the subject’s grounds for her belief), and there is no difference in the subject’s level of confidence, it is difficult to believe that such sentences express truths. But on Stanley’s view, where practical factors are crucially relevant to whether a subject knows, such claims would very often be true.

Unfortunately, Stanley’s two-part response, which is in Chapter 6, is of the “misery loves company” variety. First, Stanley counters that “Though plausible versions of contextualism do not entail” the implausible modal claims in question, “it is unclear whether contextualism is trouble free with respect to modal embeddings” (107). And he argues (108-113) that “[David] Lewis’s version of contextualism entails counterfactuals just as odd as those entailed by IRI” (113). But even if Stanley is right about Lewis’s commitments, that is just one version of contextualism. And even if contextualism in general had as much trouble here as IRI, that wouldn’t seem to diminish the fact that IRI’s troubles seem quite serious. That Stanley takes up this challenge in Chapter 6, where he compares his view with contextualism, may explain his procedure at this point. But then one would hope that he would elsewhere respond to this urgent challenge outright on behalf of his view, rather than just arguing comparatively that contextualism faces similar troubles. In the second part of his response (113-114), following remarks by John Hawthorne, Stanley claims that other theories of knowledge also have troublesome “modal consequences.” For instance, some versions of reliabilism imply that whether a subject knows that an object is a barn can depend on whether and how many fake barns there are in the vicinity, and thus license claims like: “Bill doesn’t know that’s a barn, but if there were fewer fake barns in the region, he would know that’s a barn.” But I, for one, just don’t find this claim paradoxical. I guess that’s because I just don’t find it at all implausible to suppose that whether a subject knows can depend on

whether their way of telling is reliable in the particular surroundings they find themselves in, while I do find it hard to believe that whether they know can depend on the practical facts that Stanley argues are relevant. I suppose that any who do find the statement about Bill and the barns to be as jarringly implausible as the sentences that cause trouble for IRI seem will likely avoid versions of reliabilism that would license the sentence about Bill. But, likewise, IRI's troubles here will be rightly held against the view by most who consider them, and I don't see that Stanley does much to mitigate that problem.

Stanley's great strength is displayed when he is on the offensive – attacking a rival view (either contextualism or relativism) or exploiting what he sees as weaknesses of a rival to make the case for the superiority of his own view. Here Stanley draws on his evident expertise in linguistics combined with his solid sense of general philosophical methodology to make telling points and notably raise the level of argumentation in a debate over the semantics of knowledge attributions that has been going on for quite a while.

My failure here to engage with Stanley's best arguments and my resulting concentration on points where Stanley is on the defensive does not accurately reflect where the value in this book lies. Quite the reverse: I here neglect his most important arguments because they are too challenging to be adequately engaged in a brief review. Needless to say, I find Stanley's book to be extremely important and powerfully argued. I recommend it highly, not only to those interested in recent debates over the semantics of knowledge attributions, for whom it's absolutely essential, but also to any with a healthy interest in what knowledge is – and indeed to anybody who enjoys well-executed, insightful philosophy books.

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