

Appendix F: Stine-Validity, Stalnaker-Reasonableness, and Fallibilist Positions on the Infallibilist's Tensions

As we've noted (in sections 23-24 of Chapter 5, and in Appendix D), the infallibilist can point to certain tensions between claiming to know that *p* while, at the same time, admitting that there is a *risk* that you might be wrong about *p*—or that there is a *chance* or a *possibility* that *p* is false, or that one *may* or *might* be mistaken. Here I will quickly outline some basic strategies by which a fallibilist—understood in the intuitive way outlined in Appendix D, above—might handle these tensions.

Let's start with a bit of a closer look at the kinds of tensions involved. Here is Rogers Albritton having some fun with how hard it is to combine 'I know' with 'I may be mistaken'; he has just rejected the claim that 'I may be mistaken' requires for its truth that the speaker have, not just a reason for thinking that she's mistaken, but what J.L. Austin calls a '*concrete* reason' for supposing so:

But perhaps the point is that one gives people to understand by *saying* the sentence ['I may be mistaken'], and leaving it at that, that one does have some concrete reason to suppose that one may be mistaken or wrong, in the case at hand. If so, that "implicature," in Grice's term, should be easy to cancel. Like this: "I know he is honest. But I may be mistaken. I have no concrete reason, in this case, to *suppose* that I may be mistaken, much less that I *am* mistaken. But then, I didn't in that other case, either, though as you will recall I was disastrously mistaken, there. So if I were you, I wouldn't count on it that I'm not mistaken again. Obviously, I *may* be. I wouldn't say, 'may well be.' This chap is *extremely* convincing. But he *may* be dishonest, of course. Nevertheless, as I was saying, I know he's honest. That's the position."

But this "position" doesn't exist. No implicature, if that's what it is, has been cancelled. On the contrary, the speaker has absurdly undermined what would have been a pretension to know, if he had said as much and shut up. Or *does* he know? Perhaps he does, and should have said so at the end, if not at the beginning, more emphatically, in which case he would have cancelled his rambling concession that he might be mistaken.

The fact is, “I know” and “I may be mistaken” can’t be gotten through a logical intersection by adroit steering and some sounding of horns. They inexorably collide. (Albritton 2011: 5-6)¹

Similar observations would be plausible about the relation of ‘I know’ to ‘There is some risk that I am wrong’, or ‘There is some chance that I am wrong’, or to any number of other ways of admitting some kind of possibility of error—or, again, of fallibility, in some good sense, with respect to the thing putatively known.

Of course, some may wonder just how inexorable, and how solid, is the collision of ‘I know’ with ‘I may be mistaken’ and with similar admissions of the chance or risk or possibility of error. My purpose here is to quickly survey the basic positions on such conflicts open to an intuitive fallibilist (of the simple or relaxed variety). Which strategy is most appealing to the intuitive fallibilist in a given case may depend on just how much of a tension you think there is, and how inexorable you find it to be. We will arrange the options according to how fallibilist, or how clearly fallibilist, they are in the GC-sense of that term. We are then arranging them by how genuine these positions take the conflict between the admission in question (e.g., ‘It’s possible that not- p_{ind} ’) and the claim to know (‘I know that p ’) to be. Alternatively, we can think of these strategies in terms of what they say about the skeptical inference from the admission in question to the denial of knowledge, e.g., ‘It’s possible that not- p_{ind} ; so, I don’t know that p ’.

The reaction to the alleged tensions that would be the most zealously fallibilist in the GC-sense would be the way of flat denial (if I knew the Latin, I could get a zippy label for this way by filling in the blank of ‘modus ___ tollens’²): One who simply denied that there is any serious tension between the admission and the claim

¹ These remarks are from a talk Albritton gave, I believe at the University of California, Irvine, I believe in 1987, a slightly fixed-up text of which was later published posthumously as (Albritton 2011). A year or two after that talk, a text of it that seems quite close to the final, published version of Albritton’s paper was pressed into service as the main text of a UCLA undergraduate class on knowledge and skepticism that Albritton began but that I took over when health problems forced him to stop teaching. Albritton (who was my dissertation adviser) viewed the choice before us as being between the kind of implicature-based GC-fallibilism (in the terms we are now using) that he mentions and a quite thorough-going GC-infallibilism. One source of the birth of my own contextualist views was the pressing sense that there were other—and better—important options here.

² Trent Dougherty now informs me that he majored in Latin and assures me that the term I’m looking for here is ‘modus frickin tollens’.

to know, nor even any appearance of validity to the skeptical inference, to be accounted for would certainly be a GC-fallibilist of the first order. I don't find that strategy credible in the cases before us (though I have witnessed the stance being (incredibly) adopted), but it should be included in our brief survey of options, not just for the sake of others who might react differently, but for the possibility of extending the scope of these strategy types to cover other admissions, where this strategy might make more sense.

A second stance that is a little less stringently GC-fallibilist, and that can be seen as roughly Moorean in methodological character, would be to admit that there is *some* slight intuitive pull toward finding the admission incompatible with the claim to know (and toward finding the inference valid), but to hold that it is so dominated an opposing intuitive push in the other direction that there is no call for trying to account for the slight pulls before reaching a secure verdict against them.

On the other extreme, a GC-infallibilist of the first order holds that no standard use of 'I know that p' can be true if 'It's possible that not-p_{ind}' is true at any epistemic standard by which that modal claim can be governed. Though it is in principle possible for a contextualist to hold this view, this kind of fervent GC-infallibilist will likely be an invariantist, holding that for a given subject in a given situation, there is just one epistemic standard that can govern both her knowledge claims and her epistemic modal statements,³ and that the terms are connected in such a way that one cannot count as knowing that p if, according to the epistemic standard that must govern one's relevant modal claims, it is epistemically possible from one's point of view that p is false. Early Unger is a good example of an extreme GC-infallibilist, but one does not have to be a *skeptical* invariantist, nor an infallibilist in the intuitive sense, like him to be a fervent GC-infallibilist. In fact, I suspect that this is where many invariantists will land. A moderate invariantist, perhaps impressed by the apparent sharpness and inexorability of the collisions that occur in our 'logical intersections,' can adopt this view. Being moderate, she will think we often enough do simply know all manner of things, and will in those cases of knowledge conclude that 'It is possible that not-p_{ind}' is simply false when said by one who possesses such knowledge of p. Early Unger combines infallibilism in the

³ For 'Classical Invariantists,' there will be only one set of epistemic standards that can ever govern knowledge ascriptions and epistemic modal statements. For 'Subject-Sensitive Invariantists,' we are instead speaking of the only epistemic standards that can be applied to particular subjects given certain features of those subjects' situations. For the distinction between the types of invariantists, see (DeRose 2009: 23-26).

intuitive sense with extreme GC-infallibilism; our moderate invariantist, though, shows how such extreme GC-infallibilism can be combined with fallibilism in the intuitive sense.

That leaves the intermediate views, of which I will distinguish four. A view that acknowledges the existence of an at-least-apparent conflict that needs to be dealt with, and so isn't dismissive in the way that the GC-fallibilist views we've so far are, but which claims that the conflict is due to a Gricean conversational implicature generated by either the knowledge claim or by the relevant admission of fallibility, should clearly be classified as a GC-fallibilist view. This is the type of view Albritton considers, but then rejects, in the quotation at the beginning of this section, and has been the focus of some of the wrangling over what we are here calling GC-fallibilism, since Patrick Rysiew presented such an account (Rysiew 2001: 492-8), setting off a battle over the tenability of such a mere 'pragmatic' account of (some of) our clashes.⁴ A related view would have it that the conflict is generated by a *conventional* implicature of one or both of the claims. This option would seem a bit more GC-infallibilist than the previous one, since on it the conflict is generated by the conventional meaning of the two sentences, even if not by their truth-conditional content. I am a bit leery of conventional implicatures myself (DeRose 2009: 88-9, n. 9), and should perhaps leave the classification of this position on our GC-scale to those who feel more at home with them, but I'm guessing that one who went for such an account of a tension should be construed as a GC-fallibilist.

The two intermediate positions that are left are both contextualist options. As I indicated in Appendix D, my own position, at least with respect to the knowledge-epistemic possibility clash, is that the meaning of the two claims is such that what's expressed by 'I know that p' is incompatible with what one would express by 'It's possible that not-p_{ind}', *when both are evaluated at the same epistemic standard*. On this view, the inference 'It's possible that not-p_{ind}; so, I don't know that p' is what we can call 'Stine-valid': The conclusion does follow from the premise, so long as one evaluates both at the same epistemic standards, and thereby avoids committing, in Gail Stine's memorable words, 'some logical sin akin to equivocation' (Stine 1976:

⁴ See Hawthorne (2004: 24-28) and (Stanley 2005b) for criticisms of pragmatic accounts of the clash (aimed explicitly at Rysiew only in the case of Stanley), and (Dougherty and Rysiew 2009) for replies. This battle over the tenability of 'pragmatic' accounts of our clashes is closely related to my wranglings with Rysiew over the tenability of his 'pragmatic' account of the conversational data that is used in support of contextualism, which is the primary focus of (Rysiew 2001); see (DeRose 2009: 118-124).

256). As I indicated in Appendix D, I think this view should be classified as a GC-infallibilist one, for, after all, on it, ‘I know that p’ seems to be inconsistent with ‘It’s possible that not- p_{ind} ’ in as strong a way as ‘I am tall’ is inconsistent with ‘I am not tall’.

Note, however, that the above option is only available where one is contextualist about *both* the knowledge claim and the admission of fallibility, so that the meanings of the two sentences can ‘sway together’. There is an importantly different contextualist position available even for (but not only for) cases where the knowledge claim is subject to varying epistemic standards, but the admission of fallibility is not—or *vice versa*. On this position, the inference from the admission of fallibility to the admission that one does not know is not Stine-valid, but rather what we can call ‘Stalnaker-reasonable’. To illustrate, suppose you are an invariantist about, say, ‘There is at least some slight chance that not-p’, thinking that such a claim is not governed by varying epistemic standards, and, say, you think it is almost always true. Being a good fallibilist in the intuitive sense, you’ll think that people often speak truthfully when they claim to know things, even where, as is almost always the case (on your view), there is at least some slight chance from their point of view that the things they are claiming to know are false. You can then hold that ‘There is at least some slight chance that not-p; so, I don’t know that p’, while invalid, is a ‘reasonable inference’ in something like the sense that Robert Stalnaker proposed in his (1975). To say that inference is ‘Stalnaker-reasonable’ is to say that the assertion of the premise affects the meaning of the conclusion so that the conclusion will, if need be, (tend to) come to express a proposition that must be true if the premise is true. In the case of our sample inference, you might think that bringing up the matter of a slight chance that not-p will be most germane to, and for that and/or other reasons may invoke, standards for knowledge at which slight chances of not-p are enough to block ‘knowledge’ of p. On this view, then our sample skeptical inference is not valid: The conclusion can be false where the premise is true—so long as one keeps quiet about that true premise. Rather, the assertion of the premise affects (or at least has a tendency to affect) the meaning of the conclusion in such a way that the latter comes to follow from the former.⁵ Moving

⁵ In his (2015), Alex Worsnip provides a great example of a GC-fallibilist view of this type, but one on which it is the knowledge claim’s effect on the meaning of the epistemic modal statement, rather than the other way around, that accounts for the clash in trying to make the claims together. I think Worsnip’s should be classified as a GC-fallibilist view, because, though he thinks that ‘I know that p, but it’s possible that not-p’ is

from the inference to the corresponding tension, on this type of view, putting ‘There is at least some slight chance that not-p’ into play tends to create (if need be) a context where ‘I know that p’ is governed by standards that render it incompatible with (even) slight chances that not-p. In light of its ruling that knowledge can co-exist with the truth of the relevant claim of fallibility so long as that latter isn’t actually made, I would classify this view as a GC-fallibilist one. That the knowledge-asserting sentence comes to (or has a tendency to come to) express a proposition incompatible with the admission of fallibility when the latter is put into play would be best thought of as an account of why knowledge of facts *can misleadingly appear to be* incompatible with, say, even slight chances to the contrary. This form of GC-fallibilism may be wrong (and I think it is), but it seems far from ‘madness.’

The line between GC-fallibilism and GC-infallibilism, then, seems to me best placed so that it cuts right between our two intermediate, contextualist options. But we can all be good fallibilists in at least the relaxed version of the intuitive sense of that term.

inconsistent *wherever it is asserted*, on his view, the knowledge claim and the epistemic modal claim, and indeed their conjunction, can all be true together relative to many contexts (in which these claims are not uttered). That they cannot be truthfully asserted together accounts for why they misleadingly appear to be inconsistent. This grounds an important sense on which, for Worsnip, as opposed to a GC-infallibilist like me, there can be “Possibly False Knowledge.” I don’t accept Worsnip’s account because I don’t find his (4) – (7) (at 2015: 232) as felicitous as he does.