

Aristotle and the Dependence of Rational Action on Knowledge

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Plan of my talk

- 1) How was the idea that rational actions depend on knowledge justified in our times?
- 2) Where does the debate on this seem to be heading to?
- 3) Would it be helpful to look back at what Aristotle says about rational actions and knowledge?

1) Protohistory

- L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §150: “The grammar of the word ‘knows’ is evidently closely related to that of ‘can’, ‘is able to’.”
- Peter Unger, *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 200: If S’s reason (for something X) is that p, then S knows that p; and if S’s reasons (for X) are that p and that q and so on, then S knows that p and S knows that q and so on.
- John Hyman, *How Knowledge Works*, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 197, 1999, p. 451: “personal propositional knowledge is the ability to act, to refrain from acting, to believe, desire or doubt for reasons that are facts.”
 - S knows that p IFF S can act on the reason that p.

Epistemic Contextualism

- Contrary to traditional epistemology, knowledge attributions ('S knows that p') and knowledge denials ('S does not know that p') depend on the context in which they are performed.
- So `reliability requirements`, / `justification standards` / `evidence` / etc. can mean different things, depending on the context of the knowledge attribution (everyday life, an exam, an expert diagnosis etc.).
- Argument: contextualism helps us better to reject skepticism and to explain how knowledge attributions and denials work.

Anti-intellectualism

- Intellectualism: The belief that the factors in virtue of which a true belief represents knowledge are 'truth-conducive' (they make the belief more likely to be true).
- Jason Stanley (*Knowledge and Practical Interests*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005) claims that contextualism has an unwarranted intellectualist assumption.
- Anti-intellectualism (+ interest-relative invariantism): those factors (which make a true belief into knowledge) include elements from practical rationality (as 'the cost of being wrong').
- Stanley notes that as a consequence of this idea, the distinction between practical and theoretical rationality is said to be less clear.

The link between action and knowledge

- In this context, Jason Stanley says: "As other anti-intellectuals have argued (Fantl and McGrath 2002 and especially Hawthorne 2004), it is immensely plausible to take knowledge to be constitutively connected to action, in the sense that *one should act only on what one knows* (footnote quotes Hawthorne (2004:30) saying that 'one ought to use that which one knows as a premise in one's deliberations'.) [...] A standard use of knowledge attributions is to justify action."
- Ram Neta, *Anti-intellectualism and the Knowledge-Action Principle*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 75, No. 1, 2007, p. 181: "[...] Stanley's argument for anti-intellectualism rests on the following premise:

The knowledge-action principle (KAP): S can reasonably act on the premise that p only if S knows that p."

Variations

- (KAP1): S can reasonably act on the premise that p only if S knows that p. [attributed to Jason Stanley by Ram Neta, see previous slide]
- (KAP2): If you know that p, then it shouldn't be a problem to act as if p. [attributed to Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath in John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley, “Knowledge and Action”, Journal of Philosophy 105, 2008]
- (KAP3) Refined Knowledge-Action Principle: If X knows P during period d, then for any choice between states of affairs $x_1 \dots x_n$ during d, X is rational to prefer one state of affairs A to another state of affairs B iff X is rational to prefer A to B conditional on P. [see above]
- (AKP) Action-Knowledge Principle: Treat the proposition that p as a reason for acting only if you know that p. [see above]

The Reason-Knowledge Principle

- (RKP) 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 . [John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley, “Knowledge and Action”, *Journal of Philosophy* 105, 2008]
 - A choice between $x_1 \dots x_n$ is p -dependent IFF the most preferable of $x_1 \dots x_n$ conditional on the proposition that p is not the same as the most preferable of $x_1 \dots x_n$ conditional on the proposition that not- p .
 - ‘appropriate’ means ‘rationally permissible’

2) Criticism of RKP

- Gettier cases [Brown, J. (2008). *Subject-sensitive invariantism and the knowledge norm for practical reasoning*. *Noûs*, 42(2), 167–189.]
- RKP cases can be accounted for by using a different epistemic norm of practical reasoning:
 - S can use p as a reason for an action only if:
 - S has a justified belief that p [Fantl, J., & McGrath, M. (2002). *Evidence, pragmatics, and justification*. *Philosophical Review*, 111(1), 67–94.]
 - S is justified to believe that she knows that p [Neta, R. (2009). *Treating something as a reason for action*. *Noûs*, 43(4), 684–699.]
 - S has a belief that p, which is warranted to a degree that is adequate relative to the deliberative context [Gerken, M. (2011). *Warrant and action*. *Synthese*, 178(3), 529–547.]
- No epistemic norms of practical reasoning; belief vs. acceptance [see Gao, Jie (2016). *Rational action without knowledge (and vice versa)* *Synthese*, 1–17.]

One more problem with RKP (first attempt)

- I know that p only if p is true.
- According to at least one pragmatist view, p is true IFF I successfully act on p (i. e. my deliberate action is p -dependent and it is successful).
- In this case, either (i) it cannot be appropriate to treat p as a reason for my action (according to RKP, it is appropriate to do that only if I know that p , but then my definition of knowledge is circular), or (ii) the pragmatist view with respect to truth is wrong.
- However, RKP should be neutral with respect to the notion of truth.

One more problem with RKP (second attempt)

- Actions (under descriptions) can ground knowledge (I take it that Wittgenstein suggests this in *On Certainty*; see Ştefanov, G. ‘Justifying Knowledge Claims After the Private Language Argument’, in *Early Analytic Philosophy - New Perspectives on the Tradition*, Sorin Costreie (editor), Springer, 2016, pp. 325-333)
- According to this view, my belief that there is a chair in this room can be justified by my action of touching the chair.
- It would be strange to justify a belief by performing an irrational action. So my action must have been rational.
- In this case, since I would not have tried to touch the chair if there was no chair in the room, my reasons for touching the chair should include “there is a chair in this room”.
- According to RKP, however, this can be accepted as a reason for my action only if I knew that there was a chair in this room.
- But then my justification is going to be circular.

One more problem with RKP (last attempt)

- Instead of knowledge attributions (“S knows that p”) we could talk about knowledge claims (“I know that p”). According to this view, to know is to issue a knowledge claim successfully.
- Now, issuing a knowledge claim is a speech act. That is, a verbal (or communicative) action. Of course, my knowledge claim that p is p-dependent (that is, I would not make the claim if p was not the case).
- A constitutive rule for issuing the knowledge claim that p is that p is the case. This makes p into a reason for issuing a knowledge claim (one of the reasons for claiming that I know that I am giving a lecture now is that I am giving a lecture now).
- However, according to RKP it is appropriate to use this as a reason for issuing my knowledge claim only if I know (that is, I successfully issue the knowledge claim) that p.
- This makes my appeal to this reason impossible, due to circularity.
- But my appeal to this reason should not be circular.

3) Back to Aristotle

- Plato, Meno, 98b: "true opinion leading the way renders the effect of each action as good as knowledge does".
- By contrast, Aristotle seems to support the idea that reasonable action depends not only on true beliefs, but on knowledge, since "we are moved to act" by "deliberate preference" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a.30-35), which is guided by *phronêsis* (NE, 1139b.1, 15), which, in its turn, is "a true habit, *joined with reason*" (NE, 1140b.20).
- If we assume that the traditional definition of knowledge provided by Plato (see *Meno* 98a2, *Phaedo* 76b5–6, *Phaedo* 97d-99d2, *Symposium* 202a5-9, *Republic* 534b3-7, *Theaetetus* 201d, *Timaeus* 51e5) applies in this context, then it seems to follow that:
 - In order to perform a rational action A with the intention to achieve the practical end E, one must have a true belief, joined with reason (i. e., *to know*) that by doing A one can achieve E.
- Would Aristotle support RKP, then? Perhaps we need to take a closer look.

A closer look: Aristotle about voluntary actions

- Aristotle: "[...] to act through ignorance of the act, the means and the person acted on is involuntary action" (Eud. Eth. 2.1225b, see also NE 1111a.20: a voluntary act would seem to be an act of which the origin lies in the agent, who knows the particular circumstances in which he is acting)
- It seems to follow from this that:
S does A voluntarily (where A contains a description of the action performed by S) only if S knows that S does A. [see Elizabeth Anscombe's claim in *Intentions* that if an agent S is doing something intentionally, S knows "without observation" that she is doing it]
- Of course, this points to a different link between knowledge and action:
S can treat p as a reason for doing A only if S *knows that* S did A.

Aristotle about rational choice and deliberation

“Choice cannot have for its object impossibilities (...)” [NE 1111b.20]

- Does this mean that it is reasonable to do A only if you know that A is possible? Or perhaps it is enough to believe that A is possible?

“Perhaps we may define it [choice] as voluntary action preceded by deliberation, since choice involves reasoning and some process of thought.” [NE 1112a.1]

“Deliberation then is employed in matters which, though subject to rules that generally hold good, are uncertain in their issue (...)” [NE 1112b.10]

- Does this mean that asking to treat p as a reason for doing A only if you know that p is too much? – Not necessarily (see Hawthorne and Stanley 2008 about ‘knowledge that p is reasonably likely’)

Aristotle about rational choice and deliberation (continued)

- According to Aristotle, we do not deliberate about ends (goals), but about means (see, for instance, Eud. Eth. 2.1226a,b, NE 1112b.11, 1113a.1)

“For a man stops enquiring how he shall act as soon as he has carried back the origin of action to himself, and to the dominant part of himself, for it is this part that chooses.” [NE 1112b]

- In deliberation S tracks the means to achieve a certain goal back to S’s actions (G → M1 → M2 → ... → A). If the “dominant part” is considered the intellect (noûs), then ‘doing A will result in achieving G’ could be perhaps grasped by noûs the same way in which the first principles are.

See also: “choice necessarily involves both intellect or thought and a certain disposition of character” [NE 1139a]

Aristotle about phronêsis and epistêmê

- Phronêsis (practical wisdom / prudence / practical reason) “is a truth-attaining rational quality, concerned with action in relation to the things that are good for human beings.” [NE, 1140b]
- Phronêsis “is concerned with action, so one requires both forms of it, or indeed knowledge of particular facts even more than knowledge of general principles” [NE, 1141b]
- “And it is clear that phronêsis is not the same as epistêmê: for as has been said, it apprehends ultimate particular things, since the thing to be done is an ultimate particular thing.” [NE, 1142a.20]
- Aristotle also seems to say that the intuitions by which phronêsis grasps particular truths are different from the intellectual intuitions by which we grasp scientific principles.
- see also: “since the person who deliberates badly is in error, while he who deliberates well does things correctly, good deliberation is clearly some kind of correctness; but it is not correctness in knowledge or belief.” [NE, 1142a]

Conclusions

- Most probably, Aristotle would reject RKP (he is, after all, an intellectualist), but he would do so on conceptual grounds.
- Although knowledge can help one make better rational choices, it does not seem necessary.
- Practical syllogisms are not actual syllogisms, since their conclusion is an action, not a sentence which could be true or false.
- Phronêsis produces correct (good) choices, not true beliefs. It can use true beliefs as starting points for getting at a correct (good) choice, but since it does not produce knowledge and cannot justify beliefs, it cannot decide whether or not those true beliefs represent knowledge so it disregards such an epistemic status.
- Generally speaking, even if one could state some epistemic norms for rational actions, it is conceptually impossible for phronêsis to follow such norms.
- So perhaps, if there is a link between knowledge and rational actions, it goes only the other way around - from actions to knowledge.