

The Practical Importance of Knowledge (Such as It Is)

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Abstract

In *Knowledge and Lotteries*, Hawthorne argues for a view on which whether a speaker knows that p depends on whether her practical environment makes it appropriate for her to use p in practical reasoning. It may seem that this view yields a straightforward account of why knowledge is important, based on the role of knowledge in practical reasoning. I argue that this is not so; practical reasoning does not motivate us to care about knowledge in itself. At best, practical reasoning motivates us to care about several other concepts in themselves, and ascriptions of knowledge provide economical summaries of these independently important desiderata.

Analyses of knowledge should aspire not only to explain our use of the word ‘know’ but also to explain why knowledge might be important.¹ In *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Hawthorne 2004; hereinafter KL), Hawthorne puts forth a position that seems to provide a clear and decisive answer to this question. This is that knowledge is intimately connected to practical reasoning: It is unacceptable to use p as a premise in your practical reasoning if you do not know p (KL, p. 30). Indeed, the account that Hawthorne favors makes the subject’s practical environment a determinant of what she knows:

¹ Kaplan (1985) complained that the post-Gettier epistemological literature neglected this question and concluded that knowledge does not matter. This is not quite what I will argue, although my views are closer to Kaplan’s than most other epistemologists’ views are.

(Practical Environment Constraint) Insofar as it is unacceptable... to use a belief that p as a premise in practical reasoning on a certain occasion, the belief is not a piece of knowledge at that time (KL p. 176).²

If the Practical Environment Constraint is indeed a criterion of knowledge, then knowledge would seem to be indisputably important. We certainly have a reason to be interested in whether our beliefs can serve as acceptable premises for practical reasoning.

I will argue, however, that we cannot easily establish the importance of knowledge in itself through its role in practical reasoning. There are at least two standpoints for evaluating what acceptable premises for practical reasoning are. From one standpoint, an acceptable premise is any true proposition; from the other, an acceptable premise need not be true. So, depending on which standpoint we consider it from, considering practical reasoning establishes the epistemological importance of truth and of some non-factive property. If knowledge is important with respect to practical reasoning, it is because it brings together truth and the non-factive property (together with other epistemic desiderata).

The practical importance of knowledge is thus akin to the utility of a Swiss Army knife. A Swiss Army knife contains (say) a knife blade, a corkscrew, and a screwdriver. We rarely need all of these at once, but carrying a Swiss Army knife is an economical way to carry around several things we might need on various occasions. Similarly, perhaps to say “S knows that p ” is to say economically that p is true and that S’s evidential position with respect to p is good given S’s practical environment (together with other desiderata which I will not have space to discuss). There is no particular

² Hawthorne is at pains to enumerate the pros and cons of the views he discusses rather than advocating for one or the other. The view discussed here is the one that he says he would opt for if you put a gun to his head (KL p. 188). Throughout this essay I will speak as though Hawthorne advocates this view; I will use “Hawthorne’s view” as an abbreviation for “The view that Hawthorne says he would support if you put a gun to his head.”

standpoint for evaluating practical reasoning from which all these desiderata are important, but it is useful to have a quick way of expressing them all, which can be applied on the various occasions on which we wish to evaluate some piece of practical reasoning. Nevertheless, knowledge is not important for practical reasoning in itself as an organic unity, any more than the Swiss Army knife is useful as a Swiss Army knife. The Swiss Army knife is useful on various occasions as a knife, corkscrew, and screwdriver; knowledge ascriptions are important to practical reasoning on various occasions as a true belief, a belief that is supported by the evidence, or as a belief satisfying some other desideratum.³

Hawthorne focuses on the lottery problem: We are unwilling to ascribe advance knowledge that a certain ticket in a fair lottery will not win, no matter how long the odds against it are; yet we often seem willing to ascribe knowledge of propositions that entail that a certain lottery ticket will not win. We may be willing to say that you know that you will not be able to afford to go on an African safari next year even though you own a ticket for a lottery whose prize is more than the cost of a safari.⁴ The lottery problem can stand in for much of our reasoning about the not quite certain future (or present). To use an example of Vogel's (1990), when your car is parked out of sight we may not be inclined to say that you know that it has not been stolen, for you have no particular reason for believing that your car is not one of the ones that statistically are stolen every day. Yet we will be inclined to say that you know where your car is. Similarly, we may be

³ My view is that theoretical standpoints are no better than practical standpoints for establishing the importance of knowledge in itself, but I lack the space to argue for that here.

⁴ Compare Lewis's (1996) example of Bill, who we know will never be rich because he spends all his money on lottery tickets.

inclined to say that you know where you will be next week, even though we are not inclined to say that you know that you will not be one of the few apparently healthy people who will die suddenly before the week is up. We may construct a similar lottery-like problem concerning almost any proposition about the future.

Hawthorne's Practical Environment Constraint is meant to yield the result that you may know that you will not be able to afford an African safari when it counts, but not to know that your lottery ticket will not win when *it* counts; and that you may always properly reason from premises that you know in your practical environment. The environment in which you might wish to reason from a premise that your ticket won't win will be one in which it is obviously wrong to reason from such a premise, and so also wrong to reason from the premise that you won't be able to afford a safari. In such an environment, you do not know either of these premises. Thus, suppose that there is a 10,000 ticket lottery with a \$5000 first prize, and you are offered a ticket for a penny. Hawthorne points out that it would be "intuitively awful" to reason as follows:

- [Argument A] (1) I will not have enough money to go on an African safari next year.
- (2) So if I buy the lottery ticket I will lose.
- (3) So I should not buy the lottery ticket (KL p. 174; my numbering).

Argument A is awful even though its premise (1) is not an explicit lottery statement, and even if (1) through (3) all turn out to be true (as most likely they will). If what is known is what can be used as a premise in proper practical reasoning, then you do not know (1) on this occasion.

Consider now the practical environment in which you might want to exploit your belief that (1) in a more natural way. You have bought the lottery ticket, and you are now

in a bookstore buying a guidebook for next year's vacation. Hawthorne argues that it is acceptable to reason as follows:

[Argument B] (1) I will not have enough money to go on an African safari next year.

(4) So I will have no use for a guidebook to Africa.

(5) So I should buy the local destination guide (see KL p. 177).⁵

Accordingly, on Hawthorne's account, you do know (1) on this occasion. You can know propositions about the future without ruling out lottery-like alternatives, so long as the decisions you are making do not require you to take those alternatives into account.

Note that, whatever else we may say about arguments A and B, any flaws they have lie in their premises. From the premises it follows that the action prescribed in the conclusions will be beneficial; in this way the arguments are analogous to deductively valid theoretical arguments. Call this property *formal acceptability*; in this essay I will consider only formally acceptable arguments, so as to focus on the epistemic properties of the premises.⁶

What, then, makes for acceptable practical reasoning? Sometimes we will care about whether practical reasoning in fact turns out the best for us. In the case in which you are offered the lottery ticket for a penny, the reasoning that in fact turns out the best for you is reasoning that leads you to refuse the ticket. *Ex hypothesi*, the ticket goes on to lose,

⁵ It may that, on Hawthorne's account, argument B is proper only if you have forgotten that you have a lottery ticket; if you are thinking about your ticket then you are not in a position to know (1). On the other hand, Hawthorne opposes an account on which invoking (2) in the argument from (1) to (3) destroys knowledge of the premise by making a new possibility salient; he argues that the possibility might not become salient for someone who is sufficiently dogmatic. Many other ins and outs of this debate are discussed in KL.

⁶ Sometimes good practical reasoning may not be formally acceptable, so defined. For instance, one might decide not to buy a guidebook to Africa based on the premise "Probably, I will not be able to afford a safari," even though (4) does not follow deductively and hence the argument to (5) is not formally acceptable. Such arguments may perhaps be treated as enthymematic formally acceptable arguments, with the missing premise "This time, what will probably happen will happen." That premise is akin to a lottery premise, which on Hawthorne's view can be known in an appropriate practical environment.

and you save a penny. The reasoning that will in fact leave you best off is always formally acceptable reasoning from true premises. So when we take the standpoint of caring about actual success in this argument, it is important that our premises be true.

This produces the uncomfortable result that both (1) and (2) are acceptable premises when you are offered a lottery ticket. The suspicious step is obvious, though; we do not usually identify acceptable practical reasoning with practical reasoning that in fact leads to the best outcome. Acceptable practical reasoning is more like reasoning that is carried out rationally, that is not feckless or rash or overcautious. So, from another standpoint, what is important is whether reasoning is vulnerable to criticism.⁷

From this standpoint, argument A is clearly vulnerable to criticism. The payoff for winning is so much more than the cost of the ticket that you are not entitled to ignore the small chance that the ticket will win, which is also the chance that you will be able to afford a safari. If you follow argument A, you may be criticized even though your decision in fact turns out to save you a penny. In the practical environment of the bookstore, however, you are entitled to use (1) as a premise. If you refused to buy the local guidebook because you claimed not to know whether you would be able to afford a safari, we would rightly criticize you for fecklessness. This is not the sort of decision that should be thrown into doubt because of a lottery ticket. Hence this standpoint yields the results Hawthorne desires: (1) is an acceptable practical premise in the environment of the bookstore but not in the environment in which you have been offered the ticket for a penny.

⁷ Compare Hawthorne's discussion of the reading of 'should' on which it is obvious that a premise like (1) should not be used in practical reasoning with the possible reading of 'should' on which what you should have done is what would in fact have led to the best outcome (KL p. 175n33).

The problem is that from this standpoint (1) is *always* an acceptable premise in the practical environment of the bookstore. It is acceptable even when it is false. Suppose that, in the bookstore, you refuse to follow argument B because of the remote chance that you might win the lottery, and then you do go on to win the lottery. Your original reasoning would be as feckless as it ever was; you would be lucky not only in winning the lottery but because your faulty reasoning produced the best outcome for you. Conversely, suppose you reason as in argument B, buy the local guidebook, and go on to win the lottery. Was your original reasoning acceptable? From this standpoint, yes. If argument B was beyond criticism in the case in which you win the lottery, it is still beyond criticism. You were not being feckless or dogmatic in thinking that you would not be able to afford a safari. It is simply luck that the right reasoning did not lead to the best outcome in this case. (I hesitate to call it bad luck, since you did win the lottery.)

From the standpoint that concerns itself with criticizing your practical reasoning, then, what is important is whether your beliefs are justified. Practical environment does work here, because it is practical environment that determines how much justification you may have for a belief to be acceptable. Nevertheless, this standpoint does not establish the importance of a factive property of beliefs. Unless the practical environment calls for absolute certainty, it will be the case that acceptable reasoning may proceed from false premises. *A fortiori*, acceptable reasoning may proceed from premises that are not known.

One standpoint on practical reasoning thus motivates us to care about the truth, the other whether our beliefs are supported well enough for the practical environment (for

short, 'justified enough'). Note that these two standpoints reflect very different purposes that we might have in evaluating beliefs. If we want to know whether someone will actually succeed in her endeavors, we will want to know whether her beliefs are true. If we want to know whether she has done the best she can in the current circumstances, or whether she is likely to proceed in future endeavors by similar methods, we will want to know whether her beliefs are justified enough.

The two standpoints we have considered so far may not be the only possible ones, however, and we should consider whether there is another standpoint from which knowledge is important for its own sake. One such standpoint is suggested by Williamson's account of why knowledge has more explanatory power than mere justified true belief. Williamson points out that a burglar's knowledge that there is a diamond in a house may explain his spending all night looking for it than his justified true belief that there is a diamond in the house. If the burglar had inferred his true belief from a justified false belief that there was a diamond under the bed (in fact it is in a drawer), then he would have given up after looking under the bed (Williamson 2000, p. 62). As this example suggests, most plans take time to carry out. Actual success will depend not merely on whether the practical premise is true and believed at this moment, but on whether you continue to believe it for as long as it takes to carry out the plan, so you do not abandon it.

This argument, however, does not succeed in tying together truth and justification. What matters for your success is not that you *should* continue to believe your true premise as time goes on, but that you *do* continue to believe it. You will be just as successful if you stubbornly continue to believe truly in the face of misleading evidence

as if your true belief is based on evidence the whole time. Accordingly, from this standpoint what is important is actual temporal stability of true belief, for as long as the plan takes to execute. If we add this property to the Swiss Army knife, along with truth and being justified enough, we exclude some Gettier cases and thus come closer to knowledge.⁸ But this standpoint alone does not establish the importance of knowledge.

Another way to motivate knowledge in itself is from the standpoint of criticism of practical reasoning. One might argue that reasoning that does not proceed from true premises, or even from known premises, is as such vulnerable to criticism. For instance, Williamson argues that our evidence is identical to our knowledge, and that rationality requires respecting evidence (Williamson 2000, ch. 9, revising Williamson 1997). If this were true, then rational deliberation would always proceed from known premises. Williamson bolsters this position (with respect to theoretical deliberation) by arguing that we cannot always know what is rational for us. It is not rational for someone who is hallucinating to believe that there is a table before her, because it is not supported by her evidence; though she may be internally indistinguishable from a person who sees the table and who is thus rational to believe that there is a table before her (Williamson 2000, ch. 8).

Even granting Williamson's analysis of hallucinations and similar states such as false memories, it seems unlikely that it can be generalized to show that rational deliberation always proceeds from known or even true premises, without antecedent commitment to the practical importance of knowledge or truth. Consider argument B, and let us suppose that the date of the drawing is well in the future. Is there a sense in which the person who

⁸ For the sake of simplicity, I am individuating beliefs so that a belief's truth is time-independent; something such as "It is raining" will count as a different belief for every instant at which it is thought. (One might phrase this by saying that what matters is the proposition that is believed.)

will lose the lottery is deliberating rationally and a duplicate of hers who would win would be deliberating irrationally? She and her duplicate may have observed exactly the same things, remembered exactly the same things, learned through testimony exactly the same things about the lottery's operation. The only differences between them and in the state of their worlds stems from an event that takes place well after their deliberation. The loser in the lottery has no sort of direct access to the fact that she will not be able to afford an African safari, in the way that someone who sees a table arguably has direct access to its presence.⁹

It is true that the loser's deliberation stems from a true premise and her duplicate's deliberation stems from a false one. But this does not seem to provide a basis for criticizing the duplicate's deliberation. If we say to the duplicate, "Your reasoning was bad in that it stemmed from a false premise," she may reply, "Yes, but I had every reason to believe it was true. Should I instead have reasoned from the true premise that I would be able to afford a safari? That would have led to a better outcome, but it would have been bad reasoning." To recommend different deliberation requires adopting the standpoint that is concerned with actual success, and from that standpoint it is not important that beliefs be justified. To say that rational deliberation requires true premises simply folds the property that has been motivated from this standpoint in together with the property that is motivated from the standpoint of evaluating the rationality of deliberation. Similarly, to say that rational deliberation requires known premises is either to assume the value of knowledge in itself or to call in question the value of rational deliberation so defined. If we don't already see knowledge as important, there is no

⁹ Though I do not have space to explore the possibility here, this case also calls into question Williamson's argument that all our knowledge serves as evidence; if we have inferential knowledge about the future, that will be a good candidate for knowledge that is not itself evidence.

reason for the deliberator to worry about whether she is vulnerable to the criticism that she has reasoned from an unknown premise. Her reasoning *should* have worked out, and may work out if her unknown premise is true.

This argument does not definitively establish that knowledge is not important in itself from the practical point of view. To do so, it would be necessary to take into account all the different particular standpoints from which practical reasoning can be evaluated, and show that from none of them is it important that the premises be known. Nevertheless, it suggests that it is not as easy as it may seem to establish the importance of knowledge in itself for practical reasoning, and that the importance of knowledge may be as a combination of the factors that are important for practical reasoning. If so, then either knowledge is important independent of practical reasoning, or it is indeed like a Swiss Army knife: only important as a combination of things that are each important in themselves.

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