The normative sceptical paradox and its practical solution

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If you know what you had for lunch, you could bet your mother's life on it. But you could not bet your mother's life on it. So — it would seem — you do not know what you had for lunch. This *normative* sceptical paradox can be raised about anything we take ourselves to know. It proceeds by denying that one satisfies the normative consequences of knowing. The consequences may concern some of one's attitudes as well as one's actions and speech acts. For instance, one variant relies on the premise that if one knows, they can be absolutely certain (Unger, 1975, 95).

The paradox underlies the recent discussion on "pragmatic encroachement", *viz.* the alleged effect of practical interests on knowledge or the truth of knowledge attributions. Existing diagnoses are broadly *epistemic*: they blame some assumption about knowledge or its normative consequences. We defend instead a *practical* solution that blames an assumption about what one ought to do. The paradox rests on a mistake in ethics and decision theory, not epistemology.

We need to state the paradox more rigourously. First, following Parfit (2011, 32–3), we distinguish *what you have decisive reason to do* from *what is rational for you to do*. Reasons are facts that "count in favour" of a certain action, whether you are aware of them or not. For instance, if you are allergic to nuts, you have a reason to avoid eating them. But if at the same time you do not know that you are allergic to them, it may be not rational for you to avoid them.

Second, we call a *rough bet* an optional course of action that has a very low gain (over not taking it) if successful and disatrous consequences if unsuccessful. A rough bet *on p* is a rough bet for which the course of action will be successful if p but unsuccesful if not-p. One *faces a rough bet* if one is in a situation where such a course of action is available. For instance, if you are offered a mildly pleasing but potentially deadly sweet, you face a rough bet on the sweet not being deadly. One *takes a rough bet* if one takes the course of action in question. One *wins* the bet if one follows the course of action successfully.

The paradox can now be stated as follows. For almost any case a in which one putatively knows some true proposition p, there is some case b which is just like a except that one faces a rough bet on some true proposition p^* and for which the following appear true:

Purism (P) If in a, one knows that p, then in b, one knows that p^*.

Practical Knowledge (PK) If in b, one knows that p^*, then in b, one knows that one has a decisive reason to take the bet.

Knowledge-Rational action (KRA) If in b, one knows that one has a decisive reason to take the bet, then in b, it is rational for one to take the bet.

Irrationality Assumption (IA) In b, it is not rational for one to take the bet.

The four claims are jointly inconsistent with:

Knowledge Assumption (KA) In a, one knows that p.

Purism derives from the (admittedly vague) idea that whether one knows depends only on truth-related factors (Fantl and McGrath, 2009, 28, see also Stanley, 2005, 1–6). On that view, two cases that differ only with respect to practical factors such as the cost of being wrong cannot differ in knowledge. For a given case a, the case b must be chosen so that the subject's relation to p^* is sufficiently like that of the subject's relation to p in a on truth-related aspects to make (P) compelling on the purist view.

    Practical Knowledge derives from two ideas. First:

Practical Norm (PN) In b, one has a decisive reason to take the bet.

Since p^* holds in b, if one takes the bet, one will win it and incur some gain over not taking it. Hence, the reasoning goes, one has a decisive reason to take it. The second assumption concerns the subject's factual and normative knowledge. A suitably chosen case b is one in which the subject knows that she faces a rough bet and grasps the normative consequences of the rough bet so that the following holds:

Knowledge of the Practical Norm (KPN) If in b, one has a decisive reason to take the bet, then: if in b one knows that p^*, then in b, one knows that one has a decisive reason to take the bet.

(PK) follows from (PN) and (KPN).

    Knowledge – Rational Action derives from a modest and plausible principle linking knowledge and rational actions. Such principles hold that it is sufficient and, on some versions, necessary to know p in order to be rational in treating p as a premise in one's practical reasoning (Hawthorne, 2004, 30, Williamson, 2005, 227, Hawthorne and Stanley, 2008). *A fortiori*, if one knows that one has a decisive to do something, then it is rational to do something.

    The *Irrationality Assumption* is intuitive for well-chosen b cases.

Sceptics reject the Knowledge Assumption (Unger, 1975). *Pragmatic encroachers* reject Purism, making knowledge dependent on stakes (Fantl and McGrath, 2009, Hawthorne, 2004, Stanley, 2005, Weatherson, 2011). Some *Fallibilists* and some *Invariantists* (Williamson, 2005) reject the Knowledge-Action Principle. Each solution has well-documented difficulties.

Our *Practical Fallibility* solution rejects the Practical Norm and hence (KPN). The gist is as follows. In b, taking the bet would be endorsing a disposition to act similarly in sufficiently similar cases, including cases in which one does not know but mistakenly knows that one does. Such is our practical fallibility: no disposition is available to us that would guarantee us to act only on the basis of knowledge. Hence taking the bet requires endorsing a disposition that could lead one to take the bet in situations in which one looses it — with disastrous consequences. One ought not to endorse such a disposition; hence one ought not to take the bet. The solution advocates a rule utilitarist-like view of decision problems such as the one faced in the rough bet situation.

References

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