

AGAINST PRAGMATIC ENCROACHMENT

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ABSTRACT: Anti-intellectualist theories of knowledge claim that in some way or other, practical stakes are involved in whether knowledge is present (or, where the view is contextualist, whether sentences about knowledge are true in a given context). Interest in pragmatic encroachment arose with the development of contextualist theories concerning knowledge ascriptions. In these cases, there is an initial situation in which hardly anything is at stake, and knowledge is easily ascribed. The subsequent situation is one where the costs of being wrong are fairly significant from a practical point of view, and the claim made by pragmatic encroachers is that knowledge should not be ascribed in such situations and typically is not by competent speakers. My goal here is to show how mistaken the idea of pragmatic encroachment is.

KEYWORDS: pragmatic encroachment, contextualism, intellectualism, invariantism, value of knowledge

Anti-intellectualist theories of knowledge claim that in some way or other, practical stakes are involved in whether knowledge is present (or, where the view is contextualist, whether sentences about knowledge are true in a given context). Interest in pragmatic encroachment arose with the development of contextualist theories concerning knowledge ascriptions, driven by particular examples such as DeRose's bank case, Cohen's airplane case, and illustrated more recently by Fantl & McGrath's train case.¹ In each case, there is an initial situation in which hardly anything is at stake, and knowledge is easily ascribed concerning whether the bank will be open on Saturday, what time a connecting flight will take off, or whether a given train is the one needed to get a one's destination. The subsequent situation is one where the costs of being wrong are fairly significant from a practical point of view, and the claim made by pragmatic encroachers is that knowledge should not be ascribed in such situations and typically is not by

¹ Keith DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem," *The Philosophical Review* 104, 1 (1995): 1–52, Stewart Cohen, "Knowledge and Context," *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1987): 574–583, Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

competent speakers. My goal here is to show how mistaken the idea of pragmatic encroachment is.

I will return to the cases that motivate the view after developing more general criticisms of the view. I will begin with the question of classification, and then turn to ways in which theories can be misclassified as endorsing pragmatic encroachment. After doing so, I will focus on the claims that practical stakes are epistemically relevant to the nature of knowledge.

So, first, what must a theory say in order to endorse pragmatic encroachment? Here I am going to table contextualist approaches that refuse to talk about the nature of knowledge itself. Such metalinguistic approaches can insulate themselves from the criticisms I am raising about pragmatic encroachment into the nature of knowledge, interpreting the distinctive pragmatic encroachment idea as involving knowledge itself rather than ascriptions of knowledge.² I believe there is an extension of my remarks that will apply to such metalinguistic approaches, but will focus my attention first on pragmatic encroachment regarding the nature of knowledge itself.

Since pragmatic encroachers of the sort in question hold a view about the nature of knowledge, it is important to distinguish pragmatic encroachment theories from other approaches that endorse some link between knowledge and practice.

Carelessness in one's classification scheme can yield the conclusion that intellectualists (those who reject pragmatic encroachment into the nature of knowledge) must claim that knowledge and practice have no interesting relationship to each other at all. Such is not the case, however. A version of intellectualism, say of the classical invariantist sort that maintains that knowledge is (some form of) undefeated justified true belief, might claim that knowledge matters, is important, and has value in part because it is the sort of thing one can legitimately rely on in practical affairs. It has these features, one might hold, because the kind of justification required in this account of knowledge is justification adequate for a legitimate closure of inquiry on the matter in question,³ and when one deliberates about practical matters, the resources for such

² See, e.g., Keith DeRose's endorsement of intellectualism in his recent Keith DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³For a defense of this approach to epistemic justification, see Jonathan L. Kvanvig, "Coherentism and Justified Inconsistent Beliefs: A Solution," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming, 2011) and Jonathan L. Kvanvig, "Norms of Assertion," in *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, eds. Jessica Brown and Herman Cappellen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 233-251.

deliberation are best thought of, at least in the normal case, as items from the set of things regarding which inquiry is closed. Such claims do not undermine the intellectualism of the view, since nothing in this description requires the connection to practice to be part of the nature of knowledge itself—all that is required is a link between knowledge and practice of the sort described. The view might even claim that this connection to practical affairs is metaphysically necessary, while at the same time denying that this feature is thereby a part of the nature of knowledge. In short, links to practice, even necessary links, do not force the view in question to put the linked item into the nature of that to which it is linked.

Compare on this score a generally Williamsonian approach, according to which one should go with, and only with, what you know.⁴ Such a view endorses a defeasible but necessary link between knowledge and practice and it is worth noting that nothing in a Williamsonian-inspired picture of the importance of knowledge will undergird the conclusion of pragmatic encroachment. In short, if your evidence is what you know to be true, and if practical deliberation requires using as premises only what is evidence for you, there will be important connections between knowledge and practice, but not the kind of connections needed to sustain the conclusion of pragmatic encroachment.

I am not here endorsing such a picture, but use it to illustrate the burden that any defense of pragmatic encroachment must shoulder. Williamson's approach to epistemology establishes a very strong link between knowledge and action while remaining a version of intellectualism. If pragmatic encroachers are to be successful, they will have to show that Williamson made a serious mistake—he mistook a link between knowledge and action for a component of knowledge itself. Needless to say, there is considerable argumentation yet needed to draw such a conclusion.

In fact, it is hard, from a purely theoretical point of view, to see why anything stronger than some link between knowledge and practice would be needed or desired. What difference does it make if practical stakes are included in the nature of knowledge itself rather than simply being linked to knowledge in some way? The latter has always been obvious, but the former view goes beyond this claim to something stronger. It is interesting to notice that defenders of pragmatic encroachment have not been very forthcoming as to why something beyond a metaphysically necessary link between knowledge and practice is being proposed.

⁴ See Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Moving away from this concern to the question of what makes a theory a pragmatic encroachment theory, one of the primary suggestions for the mechanism that generates pragmatic encroachment is the mechanism of salience. In the bank/airplane/train cases, salience of the risk of error occurs, and then knowledge is said to be absent. Yet, salience of the risk of error, by itself, introduces no anti-intellectualist elements into a theory of knowledge. Endorsing the idea that salience of the risk of error is relevant to whether one knows only implies a greater degree of subjectivity in one's theory of knowledge; it doesn't, by itself, undermine intellectualism about knowledge. Part of the issue here is the factor regarding which salience obtains. If it is salience concerning some practical aspect of the situation that implicates loss of knowledge, pragmatic encroachers have some hope of using salience on behalf of the conclusion they wish to draw, but if it is salience concerning the chance of error that implicates loss of knowledge, the obvious conclusion to draw is something about the degree of subjectivity involved in knowledge. In short, subjectivity in a theory of knowledge does not constitute or support pragmatic encroachment, and the phenomenon of salience, by itself, offers no direct argument for the pragmatic encroachment conclusion.

It is worth noting, however, that though the mechanism of salience gets considerable mention and discussion among pragmatic encroachers, they have universally rejected salience as the mechanism generating such encroachment. It will be more to the point, then, to consider other proposals that defenders of pragmatic encroachment have actually endorsed. We can divide such proposals roughly into those that characterize encroachment positively versus those that characterize it negatively. A popular positive characterization is that knowledge, and only knowledge is usable in practical deliberation. A negative characterization leaves open the possibility that knowledge isn't usable in practical deliberation, but insists that if it isn't, it won't be because of some epistemic weakness with respect to the claim in question.

One reason for rejecting both views is that the connection between knowledge and practice seems open to defeat by additional considerations. For example, one might point to situations in which one has knowledge, but doubts that one has knowledge; or to situations in which one has knowledge but upon reflection believes that one doesn't; or to situations in which one has knowledge, but believes that one isn't sufficiently reliable about the issue to be capable of having knowledge; or to situations in which one has knowledge but where the subject in question believes, or reasonably believes, that the subject matter is too hard for us, too hard to be capable of being learned except by testimony from the

gods; or to situations in which one has knowledge but where the subject in question thinks and has good reason to think closure of inquiry on the issue at hand isn't really appropriate in spite of the good epistemic condition for a confidently held belief on the matter. In each such case, there is some theoretical pressure to resist a connection to practice.

One might try to retain a connection to practice, and to resist pressure from some of these types of cases by endorsing a very strong principle concerning the epistemic significance of reflective ascent: that whenever negative metalevel views or concerns exist concerning first order knowledge, these metalevel views undermine that knowledge. Even for those attracted to the epistemic significance of reflective ascent, that is a bit strong: can't the metalevel facts simply diminish the degree of justification involved in the first-order epistemic condition, rather than defeat it altogether?⁵ I see no reason to adopt the stronger rather than the weaker claim here, and without a defense of the stronger claim, such considerations give us some reason to doubt both the positive and negative characterizations given above of pragmatic encroachment.

One might resist the necessity of knowledge to action as well. The deepest concerns here come from considerations about skepticism. If global skepticism is true, and in some sense there is no epistemic guarantee that it isn't true, rational practical deliberation can still function pretty much as it presently does. To commit oneself otherwise, as pragmatic encroachers do, seems to require what we might call Modal Mooreanism. I like the commonsense element of Mooreanism according to which it is not in doubt in any way whether we have knowledge, so that the falsity of global skepticism is assured, with the only interesting question being what the best explanation of its falsity is. But I think it is equally true that we are fallible about almost everything, and certainly we are about whether global skepticism is false. Even given what I said about the beauty of Mooreanism, there remains a sense in which global skepticism might be true. But pragmatic encroachers have to deny this point unless they are willing to embrace the consequence that skepticism implies paralysis regarding what to do, since they endorse a modally strong connection between knowledge and practice. In contrast, methinks Modal Mooreanism is a bridge too far.

Moreover, even if global skepticism is ruled out in some way, there remain domains of inquiry worth pursuing but where the attainment of knowledge just

⁵ For an investigation of these issues, and a defense of the epistemic significance of reflective ascent, see Jonathan L. Kvanvig, "The Rational Significance of Reflective Ascent," forthcoming in *Evidentialism and Its Critics*, ed. Trent Dougherty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

isn't in the cards. For example, suppose I'm right that positive knowledge in philosophy is one such domain. I don't think I know whether coherentism or foundationalism is true, whether externalism or internalism is true (though I do think I know that certain versions of each are false). All of this is compatible with lots of practical deliberation that relies on quality of evidence in support of some philosophical theses over others. For example, I sometimes deliberate before speaking...! And when I speak, I often assert philosophical theses that I'm well aware are within the domain of things I don't know to be true. Even so, my practical deliberation can be rational, and my assertions adequate from a practical perspective in spite of never employing claims that I know to be true. The governing principle in such cases is not that you should use only what you know to be true, but that you have to decide something and when you do you have to use whatever you've got even if it isn't as good as one could wish.

Even more damaging, however, are cases where the connection to practical concerns seems irrelevant. Consider first the positive characterizations of pragmatic encroachment, according to which knowledge in some way connects to practical affairs, either in terms of the appropriateness of use as a premise in practical reasoning or in terms of what is the (best) thing to do, all-things-considered. Among the things to do is to consider or entertain a propositions, and suppose you also know that some propositions are too morally abhorrent to contemplate (and thus consider or entertain), and suppose moral considerations, at least in some such cases, trump all else. (Visits to torture museums are illustrative here: noticing the ingenuity and creativity displayed in creating horrific devices engenders the plausible opinion that there are some things people shouldn't entertain or contemplate.) Let p be such a proposition in a situation in which the moral considerations trump everything else. So the following is true:

1. It is all things considered irrational to consider or entertain p .

Now, you also know the setup of the case, so you also know that even if you do something bad from a cognitive point of view and end up considering or entertaining p , that won't change things: it will still be all-things-considered irrational to consider or entertain p . So it is also true that:

2. Even if you know some proposition q that includes p as a constituent, it is all things considered irrational to consider or entertain p .

Now, suppose you find yourself in the unfortunate and morally indefensible position of believing p . You regret your indiscretion, and part of this regret

involves knowing that you believe p and have thus considered and entertained p . And this indiscretion doesn't change any of the above numbered items, including the claim about what you should be considering or entertaining, so it is also true that:

3. Even if you know that you believe p and have thus considered or entertained p , it is all-things-considered irrational to consider or entertain p .

Notice as well that:

4. You know that you believe p and have thus considered or entertained p .

But now, the claim that you believe p isn't a premise you can use in practical inference, because that would require considering or entertaining p , and you are rationally constrained not to do that. Moreover, if knowledge implies justification, then you are justified in believing that you believe p , even though it is not rational to act as if you believe p since that would seem to require considering or entertaining p . Perhaps there are some ways of acting as if you believe p that don't require that, but the typical action will involve it: actions such as asserting it, agreeing that it is among your beliefs when asked, etc.

A defender of pragmatic encroachment could reply that all that is needed is to find some way of acting as if you believe p that is rational, not that just any way of acting as if you believe p is rational. So maybe the principle should be that when you know p , there is always some way of acting as if p that is rational. I'm inclined to think this principle too weak. Maybe it is a necessary truth that there is always some way of acting as if p , or as if you believe p , that is rational when you believe p . Maybe much of what you do counts as refusing to act as if you believe $\sim p$, and one way to act as if p is to refuse to act as if $\sim p$. In order to sustain this weak construal, pragmatic encroachers will need to argue that this possibility never obtains in cases like the counterexample case above.

This point leaves open a more subtle attempt at an anti-intellectualist position: that the connection between knowledge and practical affairs is both constitutive and defeasible. Such a proposal plays into the hands of the intellectualist, however. Imagine a defender of a justificationist account of knowledge admitting that there are cases of knowledge that don't involve justification: they are just those cases in which the constitutive and defeasible connection between knowledge and justification is defeated! The obvious reply here is that you need a better name for your theory, such as "non-justificationist". Anti-justificationist theories of knowledge insist that justification is never

involved in knowledge; non-justificationist theories admit that it isn't always so. In short, it is hard to see how one can claim to be a justificationist about knowledge while admitting that knowledge sometimes occurs without justification. Equally so, it is hard to see how to be a pragmatic encroacher about knowledge while admitting that sometimes the preferred connection between knowledge and practice is absent.

Notice that endorsing a negative characterization of pragmatic encroachment allows escape from this problem morally abhorrent propositions. The explanation of why one can't use one's knowledge regarding one's beliefs in such cases is because the belief involves a morally abhorrent proposition, not because one's epistemic condition with respect to the belief is somehow too weak. So, it would seem open to a defender of pragmatic encroachment to note that, in such cases, the failure of a link between knowledge and practice is not due to some flaw in one's epistemic position.⁶

Negative characterizations of pragmatic encroachment are, however, too weak to sustain by themselves the pragmatic encroachment conclusion. The reason that they are too weak is that we can parody such approaches by introducing political encroachment into an account of knowledge as well: knowledge is in part constituted by political aspects, since if one knows p and can't get p accepted by every political party, it won't be due to some epistemic weakness concerning p . Or aesthetic encroachment: if you know p , but p isn't part of some beautiful picture or theory or story of some sort, it won't be due to some epistemic weakness with respect to p . The lesson here is that if one wishes to endorse pragmatic encroachment, one must find more substantive ways to connect the two than simply to adopt a negative characterization of the connection, since such negative characterizations can be deployed on behalf of a variety of other factors that clearly do not sustain the claim that these other factors now deserve a line item in an adequate account of the nature of knowledge.

The conclusion to draw is that general considerations about the nature of pragmatic encroachment show that there is good reason to resist the idea that practical matters are somehow involved in the nature of knowledge. One might still wonder, even if one grants this point, what to make of the original cases that prompted the idea that knowledge is infected in this way by practical affairs. In closing, I'd like to suggest an alternative explanation of these cases, even though none is strictly required for the argument just given against pragmatic encroachment.

⁶ See, especially, Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, for such a view.

My own inclination here, for what it is worth, is that these cases aren't so much an argument for anti-intellectualism as they are an argument for the falsity of an ordinary assumption we make about the value of knowledge, to wit: if you can't act on the information in question, then what good is knowledge? Our preference for exceptionless generalizations here may be the problem, and I'm inclined to respond that knowledge can be valuable because of its connection to practice in virtue of the fact that it is normally and often enough a central feature of what makes various practical endeavors rational. So I'm tempted to substitute a rejection of a certain value claim about knowledge for rejection of anti-intellectualism, but arguing for that position is something that remains to be done if it can be done at all.⁷

This explanation in terms of a false presupposition about the value of knowledge mirrors a false presupposition we are all quite familiar with concerning the nature of knowledge. It is quite easy to design cases in which ordinary competent speakers will deny knowledge, revealing a false infallibilist presupposition concerning the nature of knowledge. For those of us who think that the theory of knowledge requires an approach that attends both to the nature and value of knowledge, the symmetry here between false assumptions in both domains is pleasing. Infallibilism is driven by one false assumption, and pragmatic encroachment by the other. It is a pleasing result to notice how fallibilist intellectualism is well-suited to avoid both false presuppositions.

Regardless of the plausibility of this explanation of the original cases used to sustain a conclusion regarding pragmatic encroachment, the argument against pragmatic encroachment remains untouched. Whether one adopts a positive or a negative characterization of pragmatic encroachment, there are substantive grounds for rejecting the idea and endorsing the long-standing tradition of intellectualism in the theory of knowledge.

⁷ Here I recommend the Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, defense of anti-intellectualism—in my opinion, it presents the most formidable challenge to this way of defending intellectualism.