

PRAGMATIC ENCROACHMENT AND CONTEXT EXTERNALISM

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ABSTRACT: Pragmatic Encroachment (PE hereafter), sometimes called ‘anti-intellectualism,’ is a denial of epistemic purism. Purism is the view that only traditional, truth-relevant, epistemic factors determine whether a true belief is an instance of knowledge. According to anti-intellectualists, two subjects S and S^* , could be in the same epistemic position with regards to puristic epistemic factors, but S might know that p while S^* doesn’t if less is at stake for S than for S^* . Motivations for rejecting purism take two forms: case-based and principle-based arguments. In considering both approaches, I argue that PE is best viewed as externalist about epistemic contexts. That is to say, I claim that what determines a subject’s epistemic context is external to her mind.

KEYWORDS: pragmatic encroachment, anti-intellectualism, purism, contextualism

1. Pragmatic Encroachment

Pragmatic Encroachment (PE) is a rejection of epistemic purism. According to purism, only truth-related factors determine whether a belief is an instance of knowledge. According to PE,¹ when the stakes rise, the evidential threshold for knowledge rises proportionally, thus making it more difficult for a true belief to be an instance of knowledge.

A consequence of PE is that two subjects, S and S^* , could be in the exact same position regarding puristic epistemic constraints (such that both have a non-gettierized justified true belief), but S might know that p , while S^* might not, if more is at stake for S^* than S . Put more formally, anti-intellectualists typically endorse variants of the following principle.

Practical Interest Condition

The strength of S 's epistemic position with regards to p matches the practical costs S is expected to incur if p were false.²

¹ The view is often also called ‘anti-intellectualism.’ I will use both terms ‘pragmatic encroachment’ and ‘anti-intellectualism’ interchangeably throughout the paper.

² There are many ways of formulating and describing the practical interest condition. Similar formulations can be found in Jason Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) as well as Ram Neta, “Anti-Intellectualism and the Knowledge-

Both S and S* can be in different knowledge states, even if both subjects satisfy all the classical knowledge constraints. Anti-intellectualists explain the discrepancy in knowledge states by linking the presence of stakes to an elevation in the evidential threshold for knowledge. In other words, even though all the classical conditions of knowledge may remain fixed for both S and S*, S could know that p, even if S* doesn't, due to the expected cost to S* if she is mistaken.

2. Contextualism

Contextualism is the view that the meaning of the word 'knows' is context sensitive. More specifically, contextualists argue that the truth of knowledge attributions shift with the relevant contextual standards in play. For example, contextualists maintain that when one entertains skeptical hypotheses—or even alternate possibilities—the epistemic threshold for knowledge shifts upward, making it more difficult for attributors to know the proposition in question. However, in ordinary contexts—those that obtain outside of philosophical study, discussion and reflection—the standards of knowledge are usually lower. In other words, S's utterance "I know that I have hands" could be true at time t (assuming, of course, S isn't a handless BIV), while false at t+1 depending on S's context. At time t, S might be unaware of skeptical hypotheses, but perhaps at t+1, S is absconded by an epistemological skeptic. In such a situation, S's utterance of "I know that I have hands" is true at t, but false at t+1.³

In this way, contextualists deny knowledge invariantism, the view that there's only one standard of knowledge. Rather, there are multiple standards of

Action Principle," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXXV, 1 (2007): 171-195. On the other hand, Fantl and McGrath prefer to understand the condition in terms of what's rational to act on. For their various formulations, see Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, "Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification," *Philosophical Review* 111, 1 (2002): 67-94; Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, "On Pragmatic Encroachment in Epistemology," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75, 3 (2007): 558-589; Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, "Pragmatic Encroachment: It's Not Just About Knowledge," *Episteme* 9, 1 (2012): 27-42.

³ While this is a plausible, and arguably a good first approximation, for describing the basic idea behind Contextualism's response to skepticism, the view is more nuanced. DeRose outlines ways non-skeptics can block the standards of knowledge from rising using various conversational maneuvers. See Keith DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). While it's common to think that contextualists capitulate to the skeptic when such hypotheses are entertained, Contextualism has resources for salvaging ordinary knowledge attributions even when skeptical scenarios are made salient. See Ch. 4 of DeRose's *The Case for Contextualism* for more on such maneuvers.

knowledge determined by the conversational context. Contextualists typically adhere to the following thesis about knowledge.

The Contextualist Thesis

Whether a knowledge attribution, ‘S knows that p,’ made by an attributor A, is true or false, depends upon whether A’s evidence (or, if one prefers, strength of epistemic position) is strong enough for knowledge relative to standards of knowledge in A’s context.

3. Case-Based and Principle-Based Arguments for PE

Anti-intellectualists defend the practical interest constraint in several ways, such as the reliance on knowledge-action (or knowledge-rationality) principles and contrast cases (such as DeRose’s bank cases). I would first like to draw attention to the kind of cases anti-intellectualists employ in making the case that anti-intellectualism is best viewed in light of context externalism before briefly discussing principle-based approaches.⁴

Anti-intellectualists employ contrast cases to illicit the intuition that absent high stakes, subjects would know the proposition in question.⁵ Traditionally, the first contrast case is low stakes, while the second is high. Consider the following example.

Lazy Fred

It’s Saturday evening and Fred realizes he’s running low on vitamins and that if he doesn’t get them over the weekend, he won’t have enough to sustain him until

⁴ While case-based arguments and principle-based arguments are the two dominant strategies used to make the case for PE, it’s unclear which is the better approach, and as some have argued, neither succeed. Roeber for example, argues that both fail to sufficiently motivate PE. I remain neutral on which approach is better (or successful). See Blake Roeber, “The Pragmatic Encroachment Debate,” *Nous* 2 (2018): 171-195. Even anti-intellectualists who prefer the principle-based approach employ contrast cases, and explain the intuition behind them in virtue of various principles of rational action. For simplicity and ease of exposition, I will primarily discuss contrast cases and how the PE interpretation of them supports a context externalist position.

⁵ It’s worth pointing out other options for purists to accommodate the anti-intellectualist intuition. For example, Foley would account for the intuition in these cases by appealing to the notion of an epistemically responsible belief. In other words, contrary to what anti-intellectualists suggest, subjects in both high and low know the respective proposition, but in the high case variant, the subject is acting in an epistemically irresponsible way. See Richard Foley “Epistemically Rational Belief and Responsible Belief,” in *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Cobb-Stevens (Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Center, 2000), 181-188.

Monday. He remembers the pharmacy being open on Sunday, having been there just two weeks ago, and decides he can hold off until Sunday morning. Fred thinks to himself: *I was there just two weeks ago, and pharmacies rarely change their hours. I know the pharmacy will be open tomorrow. I'll get my vitamins then.*

Diabetic Sally

Sally has diabetes and needs insulin to survive. It's Saturday evening and she realizes at 7pm that her insulin supplies are too low to maintain her through Sunday. If she runs out of insulin, she runs the risk of serious injury, and possibly death. She remembers from two weeks ago that her pharmacy was open on Sunday. She doesn't feel like braving the weather to get an insulin refill and thinks to herself: *I know the pharmacy will be open tomorrow. I was there just two weeks ago. I'll get my supplies in the morning.*

In the first case, the intuition is supposed to be that since little is at stake for Fred, memorial evidence suffices for him to know the pharmacy will be open. In the second case, however, since more is at stake if Sally is mistaken, the evidential threshold rises, and memorial evidence alone is insufficient for her to meet the more demanding standards of knowledge. Thus, while Sally and Fred are in identical epistemic positions regarding evidence, Fred's is sufficient to meet or surpass the lower epistemic threshold for knowledge, while Sally's isn't.

Now consider DeRose's classic bank cases in which the evidential threshold is elevated in virtue of potential financial loss.

Bank Case A. My wife and I are driving home on a Friday afternoon. We plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit our paychecks. But as we drive past the bank, we notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoon. Although we generally like to deposit our paychecks as soon as possible it is not especially important in this case that they be deposited right away, so I suggest we drive straight home and deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning. My wife says 'Maybe the bank won't be open tomorrow. Lots of banks are closed on Saturdays.' I reply, 'No, I know it will be open. I was just there two weeks ago on Saturday. It's open until noon.'

Bank Case B. My wife and I are driving home on a Friday afternoon, as in Case A, and notice the long lines. I again suggest we deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning, explaining that I was at the bank on Saturday morning only two weeks ago and discovered that it was open until noon. But in this case, we have just written a very large and very important check. If our paychecks are not deposited into our checking account before Monday morning, the important check we wrote will bounce, leaving us in a *very* bad situation. And, of course, the bank will not be open on Sunday. My wife reminds me of these facts. Then she says, 'Banks do change their hours. Do you know the bank will be open tomorrow?' Remaining as confident as I was before that the bank will be open then, still, I

reply, ‘well, no, I don’t know. I’d better go in and make sure.’⁶

As we will see in the next section, anti-intellectualists give a divergent account of why in the second two cases subjects fail to know the relevant proposition.

Besides contrast cases, anti-intellectualists also employ knowledge-action or knowledge-rationality principles to motivate PE. For the sake of simplicity and ease of exposition, I will only present two common formulations. The purpose of such principles is to provide solutions to a myriad of worries purist epistemologies face, such as the epistemic threshold problem as well as explaining the intuitive knowledge discrepancy between low and high stakes cases. In dealing with the epistemic threshold problem, Fantl and McGrath write, “How probable must p be for you to know it? It must be probable enough to properly put to work as a basis for belief and action.”⁷ Further clarifying, they formulate the following principle:

Your probability for p is knowledge-level iff the probability that non- p doesn’t stand in the way of p ’s being put to work⁸ as the basis for belief and action.⁹

As stated before, this principle, and ones similar to it, are used not only to explain the intuition behind contrast cases, but also as an independent reason for endorsing anti-intellectualism over purism. In Bank Case B, Keith doesn’t know that the bank will be open on Saturday in virtue of the probability of its negation standing in the way of his acting on that proposition.¹⁰

⁶ DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism*, 1-2.

⁷ Fantl & McGrath, *Knowledge*, 65.

⁸ Fantl & McGrath leave the notion of p ’s being put to work undefined. One could cash this out in many ways, and in Ch. 3 of *Knowledge* they present several principles which further employ the notion of ‘standing in the way.’ Arguably the easiest way to explicate this phrase, within the PE framework, is to see how it accounts for the bank-style cases employed. For example, consider DeRose’s Bank Case B. While the probability that the bank will be open on Saturday is moderately high, the stakes stand in the way of him knowing this, thus preventing Keith from putting to work his belief that the bank will be open on Saturday.

⁹ Fantl & McGrath, *Knowledge*, 65

¹⁰ There are several formulations of knowledge-action principles. For the sake of simplicity and ease of exposition, I only present only two. For a discussion of these principles, and alternate formulations, see John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley, “Knowledge and Action,” *Journal of Philosophy* 105, 10 (2008): 571-590; C.S. Sripada and Jason Stanley, “Empirical tests of interest-relative invariantism,” *Episteme* 9, 1 (2012): 3-26; Fantl & McGrath “Evidence,” and “Pragmatic Encroachment;” Jessica Brown, “Subject-Sensitive Invariantism and the Knowledge Norm for Practical Reasoning,” *Nous* 42, 2 (2008): 167-189; Jessica Brown, “Knowledge and Assertion,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXXXI, 3 (2010): 549-566; Jessica Brown, “Practical Reasoning, Decision Theory and Anti-Intellectualism,” *Episteme* 9, 1 (2012): 1-20; Mark

Arguably a simpler formulation such principles takes is that knowledge is a necessary—although not a sufficient condition—for acting on a proposition:

For any subject S and any proposition P, S can only rationally act on P if S knows that P.¹¹

This principle is able to explain the intuition that in high stakes cases, subjects either don't know the relevant proposition in question or else need stronger epistemic justification for their belief to count as an instance of knowledge. In Bank Case B, Keith can't put off going to the bank since he can't rationally act on the proposition "the bank will be open on Saturday," since he doesn't know the bank will be open.

The above formulation cast in terms of knowledge being a necessary condition on rational action is the one endorsed by anti-intellectualists, and therefore, other variants will not be considered at length.¹²

Schroeder, "Stakes, Withholding, and Pramatic Encroachment on Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 160, 2 (2012): 265-285; and Roeber, "The Pragmatic Encroachment Debate."

¹¹ While I will not entertain objections to this principle at length, it's minimally worth pointing out (i) its counterintuitiveness and (ii) an objection when employed in anti-intellectualist reasoning. Consider a case where S finds herself face to face with a tiger. Presumably the stakes rise to a point where even visual perception is insufficient for her evidence to meet the more demanding epistemic threshold. In such a case, S doesn't know the proposition: 'there is a tiger in front of me' and consequently cannot act on that proposition (such as fleeing, or if she has the proper weapons, fighting back). Another problem is that it seems that the more that is at stake, the more rational it is to act on the high stakes proposition. Considering the previous case, not only does it seem that S ought to act on the proposition, but it strikes me as obvious that she is more justified in doing so given such high stakes. In other words, one could plausibly invert the knowledge-action principle so that as the stakes rise, one is proportionally more justified in acting on it. Suppose that it wasn't well established that humans are a significant contributor to climate change. It seems that given the gravity of the situation, even given flimsy evidence that, all other things being equal, one has a good reason to act on that proposition. While these are important considerations, the purpose of outlining standard variants of knowledge-action principles is exegetical, not evaluative.

¹² Logical space affords at least two other formulations, a sufficient and a bi-conditional principle. However, such principles run into serious obstacles. One could easily imagine, for example, a case where knowing that p doesn't justify one in acting on p. Perhaps S knows that God doesn't exist, but that hardly justifies S is proclaiming such in a crowded church. For this reason, among others, interpreting knowledge-action principles in terms of sufficient conditions is unpopular among anti-intellectualists. However, Fantl and McGrath seem to suggest a pro tanto variant of the sufficient condition formulation. Given that it's unclear (at least to me) how this formulation works in service of PE ends, I will not explore it here.

4. Pragmatic Encroachment and Context Externalism

Jason Stanley argues that, for contextualists, salience of error, rather than an elevation in stakes, is what causes Keith's context to shift from a low to a high standards one. If, in Bank Case B, Keith's wife hadn't made him aware that banks sometimes change their hours, Keith would arguably remain in an epistemically less demanding position. In making the case that PE (or, as he calls it, 'Interest-Relative Invariantism') provides a superior explanation of contrast cases, Stanley argues that PE is able to explain the intuition behind traditional bank cases as well as others that contextualists struggle with. In the following case, Sarah and Hannah occupy a high stakes context, even though both are unaware of the expected consequences of being mistaken.

Ignorant High Stakes

Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit their paychecks. Since they have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their paychecks by Saturday. But neither Hannah nor Sarah is aware of the impending bill, nor the paucity of available funds. Looking at the lines, Hannah says to Sarah, 'I know the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on Saturday morning. So we can deposit out checks tomorrow morning.'¹³

Stanley claims that while PE can explain the upward shift in the standards of knowledge for Hannah and Sarah, contextualists struggle providing a satisfactory explanation since salience of error is absent. Stanley accounts for the difficulty contextualists face by ascribing to their position an intention-based notion of contextual shifts. As he writes, "On this standard account of context-sensitive expressions, their semantic contents, relative to a context, are determined by facts about the intentions of the speaker using that expression."¹⁴ Since intentions play no, or at best a marginal role in Ignorant High Stakes, contextualists struggle explaining cases where subjects are ignorant of the practical cost of being wrong. It *seems* that contextualists are committed to saying that Hannah and Sarah are in a low standards context, which appears to be a mistaken account of Ignorant High Stakes.¹⁵

¹³ Stanley, *Knowledge*, 5

¹⁴ Stanley, *Knowledge*, 25

¹⁵ One might object that Stanley has unfairly characterized contextualism as being too committed to salience of error raising the epistemic threshold for knowledge. For example, one might point out that what partially fixes a context, even for contextualists, are mind-independent factors. Consider the following attribution made by subject S, "Jack knows carrots are orange." Part of

My employment of Ignorant High Stakes is not meant to provide a reason for preferring PE over contextualism. Rather, the aim is to highlight a case in which contextual shifts move independently of a subject's awareness.

A more fundamental reason to think IRI-theorists are externalists about epistemic contexts is that epistemic shifts occur for subjects, rather than attributors. If an epistemic context shifts for a subject—whether she be the subject of a knowledge attribution or not—then it's plausible that standards of knowledge shift independently of awareness.

The claim that PE is best seen in light of context externalism might strike some as either obvious or else trivial and therefore not worthy of exposition. However, if anti-intellectualists are externalists about epistemic contexts, there are a range of cases they struggle explaining.

Problematic cases for anti-intellectualists are those in which subjects or attributors mistakenly think they occupy a high stakes context. The intended intuition is supposed to be that the epistemic threshold for knowledge rises for S, even though nothing is at stake if he's mistaken. While such cases are problematic for anti-intellectualists, arguably contextualists and purists alike are able to do so with ease.

Mistaken Bank Case

It's Friday evening and Keith is driving home from work. He passes the bank with his check in hand and notices long lines. Feeling tired he'd rather deposit his check on Saturday. However, he believes he has an impending bill due Monday, and if late, could lead to foreclosure on his house. Unbeknownst to him, his wife

what fixes the context for S is the fact that carrots are orange (and this fact is, plausibly, independent of Jack's awareness). I concede that many factors, both mental and non-mental, determine what context a subject or attributor is in. However, given what I have said about contextualism, external facts would fail to either raise or lower the epistemic threshold for knowledge independent of awareness. Perhaps one is comfortable developing an externalist account of contextualism, but this faces at least two problems. First, it robs the cases contextualists use to support their arguments for contextualism. For example, in DeRose's bank cases, external factors remain fixed across both situations, but the contextual content is different in B than in A. What causes the shift in Bank Case B is Keith's wife making him aware that banks sometimes change their hours. A more serious concern is externalist views of contextualism would fail to provide a solution to skepticism. Contextualism is largely motivated by its ability to account for how ordinary people have knowledge. Contextualists maintain that since ordinary people are unaware of skeptical scenarios, their epistemic position is less demanding, and therefore their true belief can meet or surpass the evidential threshold for knowledge. If one externalizes contextual shifts, then it seems one is committed to skeptical worries undermining ordinary knowledge attributions, whether or not subjects or attributors were aware of them.

surprised him by depositing money in his account earlier in the day. Keith, being ignorant of his wife's kind deed, says to himself, "banks sometimes change their hours. I don't know the bank will be open tomorrow. I better deposit my check now."

My contention is that in this case, anti-intellectualism coupled with context externalism, gives the intuitively wrong answer, while contextualism, and perhaps purism, does.

Contextualists can explain the first case in the following way: since there's salience of error, Keith is in a high standards context. It doesn't matter that there is no real consequence for him being wrong; his beliefs about the situation are sufficient to elevate his epistemic context from a less, to a more, demanding one.

Purist epistemologists have a more straightforward response. Since only truth-related factors transform a truth belief into an instance of knowledge, whether Keith is mistaken about the practical consequences of his belief is irrelevant. If Keith's evidence (or, if one prefers, strength of epistemic position) is strong enough to meet the evidential threshold for knowledge, he knows the bank will be open on Saturday.

Anti-intellectualists, on the other hand, seem committed to the claim that Keith is in a low standards context, since nothing is *really* at stake for him if he is mistaken. If the bank does change its hours, he will still have the necessary funds to make his house payment. Further, principle-based explanations of Mistake Bank Case (and those similar to it), fail to provide a satisfactory account. Could Keith rationally act on the proposition "the bank will be open on Saturday?" Presumably he could since little is at stake if he's wrong, and therefore, given the low (or moderately low) epistemic threshold for knowledge, his belief that the bank will be open on Saturday is true. Hence, he could be rational to put off going to the bank.

One might object that even though Keith knows the bank will be open, and therefore satisfies the knowledge-action principle's constraint on rational action, his beliefs about the situation fail to make it sufficient for him not to deposit his check. In other words, an anti-intellectualist might respond that even though Keith knows that the bank will be open on Saturday, he should still deposit his check given his beliefs about the situation. However, this response conflicts with other anti-intellectualist theses. Consider the following principle from Fantl and McGrath:

(KJ) If you know that p , then p is warranted enough to justify you in Φ -ing, for

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any Φ .¹⁶

Given the low stakes in Mistaken Bank Case, it's plausible to think that Keith knows the bank will be open on Saturday, and therefore, he should be able to act on the proposition "I know the bank will be open on Saturday" and put off depositing his check. Instantiating the variables in KJ, we get the following argument that it's rational for Keith to wait to deposit his check:

P1. If Keith knows that the bank will be open on Saturday, then it is rational for him to wait to deposit his check until Saturday.

P2. Keith knows that the bank will be open on Saturday

C. It is rational for him (Keith) to wait to deposit his check until Saturday.

There's an additional worry that needs to be addressed. One might think that anti-intellectualists don't need to be externalists about epistemic contexts. After all, there's nothing built into the structure of the view committing them to such a position. However, there are plausible reasons why an anti-intellectualist would be unwise to reject context externalism.

Given context externalism, anti-intellectualists are able to account for a potentially infinite number of generable cases contextualists cannot. Any case in which the stakes are high, but the subject is unaware of them, anti-intellectualists can provide an explanation for. If context externalism is rejected, then PE lacks the resources to provide a superior explanation over contextualism and purist epistemologies.

Since PE is subject, rather than attributor focused, what's at stake moves independently of awareness. If S is faced with two cups, one filled with water and the other poison, she need not be aware that anything is amiss for her to be in a high stakes situation.

Hence, while anti-intellectualists are not committed to context externalism, it's nevertheless wise for them to endorse the view, since they are able to account for ignorant high stakes cases. Additionally, given the subject focused nature of PE, context externalism strikes me as a natural position for anti-intellectualists to adopt.

¹⁶ Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge*, 66.