Rational Action without Knowledge (and Vice Versa)

Abstract It has been recently argued that knowledge is the norm for practical reasoning. A way of formulating this norm is the following bi-conditional: it is rational to treat p as a reason for acting if and only if you know that p. In my talk, I provide three new counterexamples to this claim. I show cases of rational action: i) performed in sceptical scenarios in which knowledge is absent, ii) based on scientific hypotheses and iii) motivated by imagining. These three types of cases constitute objections to the left-to-right direction of the bi-conditional: it is shown that it is appropriate for a subject to act as if p even if she does not believe (and thus does not know) that p. Furthermore, I suggest that the last case is also a counterexample to the right-to-left direction of the bi-conditional: it is shown that one can know that p but that it is inappropriate for her to treat p as a reason for acting. In the rest, I explore whether any other version of the knowledge norm could still be maintained and conclude that none of them is worth preserving.

1. The Knowledge Norm of Practical Reasoning

Before the result of a lottery is announced, it is inappropriate for me to sell my lottery ticket for a penny on the basis that I will lose it, since I do not know that. On the contrary, if I know that my door is locked, it seems that there is nothing wrong for me not to come back and check whether it is locked. On the basis of our ordinary defenses and criticisms of action in the above and similar cases, some philosophers argue that knowledge is the norm of practical reasoning or rational action (Hawthorne 2004, Stanley 2005, Fantl and McGrath 2007, Hawthorne and Stanley 2008).

The idea that knowledge is the norm of practical reasoning has been put forward in different forms. One of the most popular formulations has been suggested by Hawthorne and Stanley (2008):

Knowledge-Reason Principle (KRP)
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.1

The bi-conditional claim KRP can be split into the two following conditionals:

NEC: if it is appropriate to treat p as a reason for acting, then S knows that p.
SUFF: if S knows that p, then it is appropriate to treat p as a reason for acting.2

In the next section, I provide three counterexamples to the knowledge norm in order

1 Ibid., 578. Hawthorne and Stanley identify ‘appropriateness’ with ‘rational permissibility’.
2 Given that the cases considered in this paper take ‘p-dependent choices’ for granted, I will omit this specification.
to show that neither NEC nor SUFF is right. Then, in section 3, I show that there are other six possible formulations of the norm. I argue that none of them is worth preserving.

2. Counterexamples to the Knowledge Norm of Practical Reasoning

In this section, I show cases of rational action: i) performed in sceptical scenarios in which knowledge is absent, ii) based on scientific hypotheses and iii) motivated by imagining. I suggest that all them are objections to NEC and the last case is also a counterexample to SUFF.

2.1 Rational Actions in Sceptical Scenario

A sceptic is trying to convince her friend (F) that she doesn’t know that she has hands because she doesn’t know whether she is a brain-in-a-vat or not. During this conversation, F moves her cup to her lips and drinks the coffee. In this scenario, intuitively, it seems that F’s action cannot be criticized as irrational. Supposing that F moves the cup consciously, that F has a cup of coffee in her hand (hereafter, H) is one of the reasons motivating her action. According to NEC, if it is appropriate for F to treat H as a reason for acting, then F knows H. But it is controversial that F knows that proposition in the scenario. Here one could object that believing that one does not know that p does not entail that one does not know that p. A possible way to defend the step from F’s belief that she does not know H to F’s ignorance of that proposition is by assuming that in the envisaged situation F has an appropriate access to her own epistemic states. There are some philosophers suggesting that our access to our own mental state is fallible, for example, Neta (2009) holds that it is possible to know that p even if one believes that one does not know that p. But the point of Neta doesn’t conflict with what is suggested here. That the failure of transparency in some cases is possible does not entail that it is necessary. It is possible that, in the described scenario, F has doxastic access to her ignorance. Even a single possible case in which F has access to her ignorance of the relevant proposition (H) is sufficient to entail the violation of NEC.

2.2 Rational Actions Based on Hypothesizing

Performing actions based on hypotheses is a prevalent phenomenon in academic research. If at least some of these actions are rational, this provides another type of counterexample to the knowledge norm. In a common scientific inquiry, a scientist firstly develops one question about a natural phenomenon that cannot be satisfactorily explained by the available scientific theories. Then she will put forward a hypothesis that can explain this phenomenon and chooses some of its consequences to be tested. In the next, the scientist will conduct experiments to determine whether observations of the real world agree or conflict with the predictions. At last, she will analyse the results of the experiments and decides the next actions to take.

In this procedure, the reasoning in the third step and the actions performed in the fourth step, such as designing an appropriate experiment and preparing the material
for the experiments, are both based on the supposition that the hypothesis advanced in
the second step is true. As necessary components of a scientific inquiry (at least in
normal circumstances), actions based on merely hypothesized propositions are fully
rational, even required. Now if NEC is right, then the hypothesized content
functioning as a reason for acting is also supposed to be known by scientists.
However, contrary to NEC, hypotheses are not knowledge. Hypotheses are opinions
or conjectures formed on the basis of incomplete evidence. Sometimes they are
wrong. That is why we need to conduct empirical experiments to see whether they are
true.

2.3 Rational Actions Motivated by Imagining

Consider the following case based on the analysis of imagining discussed by
Velleman (2000):

*Pretending To Be an Elephant*

Tom is a young boy who is curious about what it would be like to be an
elephant. So he imagines weighing a ton, walking on stumpy legs, and carrying
floppy ears. He intuitively reacts to his imaginations, taking actions within his
elephant-world. Tom’s pretending is conducted in a natural and unreflective
way, without being aware of his imaging to be an elephant.

In the context of this pretending game, Tom’s action of behaving as an elephant is
rationally permitted to him. According to NEC, since knowledge is necessary for
appropriate actions, Tom should know that he is an elephant when he acts so.
However this is clearly not the case in the play. Firstly, if Tom has a normal
psychological state, Tom doesn’t believe that he is a real elephant. Secondly, even if
Tom believes to be an elephant, given the requirement that knowledge is factive, his
belief that he is an elephant cannot be knowledge.

This case is also a counterexample to SUFF. In the context of the play, Tom knows
that he is not an elephant, but it is not rationally permissible for Tom to treat this
proposition as a reason for acting. Because imagining requires that one really enter
into the fiction of being something other than he is, what can be put into reasoning
should be ‘I am an elephant’ rather than ‘I am not an elephant’. This constitutes a
violation of SUFF: Tom knows that p but is not rationally permissible for him to treat
p as a reason for acting.

3. Modified Versions of the Knowledge Norm

In the above sections I show that NEC and SUFF are too strong principles.
However, this doesn’t show that there is no relation at all between knowledge and
rational action.

There are two variables that can provide us alternative formulations of NEC and
SUFF. First, we can quantify either universally or existentially on factual situations in
which the subject may engage in practical reasoning (hereafter, *practical situations)*.
Second, there are at least two positions in which such quantifiers can be located: outside the conditional sentence, taking a wide scope on the conditional, or inside the conditional sentence, taking a narrow scope. Accordingly, we get four formulations of NEC and the same for SUFF (U stands for ‘universal’, E for ‘existential’, W for ‘wide scope’ and N for ‘narrow’):

U-W-NEC) for \textit{any} practical situation (if it is appropriate for S to treat p as a reason for acting, then S knows that p).

U-N-NEC) if, for any practical situation (it is appropriate for S to treat p as a reason for acting), then S knows that p.

E-W-NEC) for \textit{some} practical situation (if it is appropriate for S to treat p as a reason for acting, then S knows that p).

E-N-NEC) if, for \textit{some} practical situation (it is appropriate for S to treat p as a reason for acting), then S knows that p.

U-W-SUFF) for \textit{any} practical situation (if S knows that p, then it is appropriate for S to treat p as a reason for acting).

U-N-SUFF) if S knows that p, then, for \textit{any} practical situation (it is appropriate for S to treat p as a reason for acting).

E-W-SUFF) for \textit{some} practical situation (if S knows that p, then it is appropriate for S to treat p as a reason for acting).

E-N-SUFF) if S knows that p, then, for \textit{some} practical situation (it is appropriate for S to treat p as a reason for acting).

U-W-NEC and U-W-SUFF correspond to the formulations of NEC and SUFF criticised in the above section. Let us consider the other six claims.

To falsify U-N-NEC, we need to find cases such that in every practical situation it is appropriate for S to treat some proposition p as a reason for acting, but S still does not know that p. Such a conditional seems to be intuitively true. However it is difficult to find a case in which the antecedent of U-N-NEC is true. It is widely held by many philosophers that there is always some possible practical situation in which the stakes for the subject are so high that, for any proposition p, it is inappropriate for S to treat p as a reason for acting. If the antecedent of U-N-NEC is false, the conditional is trivially true.

U-N-SUFF does not escape from the objections to U-W-SUFF. As Tom’s case shows, when he imagines that he is an elephant, it is not permissible for Tom to treat the proposition that he is not an elephant as a reason for acting, though he knows he is not an elephant, which is contrary to U-N-SUFF.

E-W-NEC, E-W-SUFF and E-N-SUFF are immune to the objections of my counterexamples. However, these principles are trivially true and of no particular philosophical interest. For these principles being valid, it is sufficient that there is at least one single practical situation in which one knows that p and it is appropriate for S to treat p as a reason for acting. And we have obvious examples of these cases.

E-N-NEC is too strong. It says that as long as in some circumstance it is
appropriate for S to act on p, then S knows that p. It is clearer to see how strong this principle is if we refer to its contrapositive conditional: if S does not know that p, then for any practical situations it is inappropriate for S to treat p as a reason for acting. All the counterexamples advanced against NEC in the second section are also counterexamples to E-N-NEC.

I distinguished eight different formulations of the knowledge norm. I identified the two forms discussed in the previous sections and examined the other six alternative forms. Four of these formulations are trivially true, thereby lacking substantial philosophical interest. Two other formulations are affected by the counterexamples introduced in section 2. In conclusion, none of alternative principles is worth persevering.

References