

# Anti-intellectualism and the Knowledge-Action Principle

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Jason Stanley devotes most of his very instructive book *Knowledge and Practical Interests* to arguing for:

Anti-intellectualism: Whether S knows that p at a particular time t constitutively depends upon the practical costs of S's being wrong about p at t. The higher those costs, the more stringent are the conditions required for S to know that p.

How does Stanley argue for this remarkable thesis? Stanley's case for anti-intellectualism may *appear* to be an argument to the best explanation of our intuitions concerning five cases, which he calls "High Stakes," "Low Stakes," "Ignorant High Stakes," "Low Attributor-High Stakes," and "High Attributor-Low Stakes." But if that is his argumentative strategy, then it suffers from a problem: Stanley's professed intuitions about "Low Attributor-High Stakes" (at least) are not right. More precisely, our intuitions about "Low Attributor-High Stakes" vary, and they vary in a way that Stanley does not explain, but that some contextualists can explain. Furthermore, there is a version of intellectualist contextualism that provides a better explanation of the other four cases, and also of the variation of intuitions about "Low Attributor-High Stakes."<sup>1</sup>

Now, if Stanley's case for anti-intellectualism were simply an argument to the best explanation of our intuitions concerning these five cases, then this would indeed be a serious problem for him. But Stanley makes a remark that suggests that this is not his argumentative strategy. He admits that intuitions about the five cases may differ from person to person, but then he goes on to say the following: "The role of these intuitions is not akin to the role of observational data for a scientific theory. The intuitions are instead intended to reveal the

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, two versions: see DeRose, 2005 and Neta, Forthcoming.

powerful intuitive sway of the thesis that knowledge is the basis of action. Someone who denies that we have many of these intuitions is denying the pull of the link between knowledge to action.” (Stanley, 2005, 12) This passage strongly suggests that Stanley’s argument for anti-intellectualism rests on the following premise:

The knowledge-action principle (KAP): S can reasonably act on the premise that p only if S knows that p.

So, on the basis of this textual evidence, I assume that Stanley’s argument for anti-intellectualism rests on the KAP.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Stanley also offers many linguistic arguments against contextualist strategies for explaining our intuitions concerning the five cases, but none of these arguments individually tells against the contextualist strategy as a whole. Rather, Stanley argues piecemeal against each of many different contextualist strategies. In particular, Stanley argues against DeRose’s “indexical” model for the semantics of “knows.” His argument depends upon the following point:

“it is not a semantic fact about core indexicals that they generally have the same denotation within a short discourse. It is rather a consequence of mundane physical facts about humans. Different occurrences of ‘here’ within a discourse tend to have the same denotation, because most of our conversations occur while remaining in the same location. Different occurrences of ‘I’ within a single sentence tend to have the same denotation, because speakers rarely change mid-sentence. There is no reason to think that analogous mundane physical facts determine the same standard of knowledge throughout a discourse” (Stanley, 2005, 66).

As I argue elsewhere, this last quoted sentence (or rather, the relevant cousin of it that would result if we deleted the term “physical”) is false: there is in fact a reason to think that analogous mundane facts determine the same standard of knowledge throughout a discourse,<sup>3</sup> and so Stanley’s linguistic arguments against indexicalist contextualism fail.

In this paper, I will not attempt to state, let alone defend, my own version of intellectualist contextualism. Instead, what I will do here is argue that the conjunction of anti-intellectualism and KAP is false. In other words, either anti-intellectualism is false, or KAP is false—and in the latter case Stanley’s argument for anti-intellectualism rests on a

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<sup>2</sup> Also see Hawthorne, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> See Neta, Forthcoming.

false premise. Either way, Stanley's case for anti-intellectualism does not succeed.

To bring out the problem that results from conjoining anti-intellectualism with KAP, let's begin by considering the following case. Kate needs to get to Main Street by noon: her life depends upon it. She is desperately searching for Main Street when she comes to an intersection and looks up at the perpendicular street signs at that intersection. One street sign says "State Street" and the perpendicular street sign says "Main Street." Now, it is a matter of complete indifference to Kate whether she is on State Street—nothing whatsoever depends upon it. So Kate does not care, and has not the slightest reason to care, whether she is on State Street; but she very much cares, and has great reason to care, whether she is on Main Street. She looks straight at the pair of street signs that say "State" and "Main." The ambient lighting is perfectly normal, and Kate's eyesight is perfectly normal, and she sees both street signs equally clearly. She has no special reason to believe that either street sign is inaccurate, though she also has no special reason to think either one of them any more likely to be accurate than any other street sign. There is nothing else unusual about the circumstances. On the basis of seeing the street signs, Kate comes to believe that she is at the intersection of State and Main. Being logically competent, Kate also believes that she is on State Street, and she also believes that she is on Main Street. Finally, her level of confidence in each of these propositions (i.e., that she is on State, and that she is on Main) is high enough that it satisfies whatever degree-of-confidence condition holds for knowledge.

Now, if the actual or perceived costs of error are high enough, then, I take it that the anti-intellectualist would say that Kate cannot know—simply on the basis of seeing a single street sign for a moment—that she is on Main Street. Knowing that she is on Main Street would require more than is afforded her by that one visual episode. Of course, if the anti-intellectualist wishes to say that, no matter how high the stakes, seeing an accurate street sign for a moment is *under all circumstances* sufficient evidence for one to know which street one is on, then we should adjust the details of our story about Kate. We could do this by stipulating that the street signs are somewhat faded, or a bit distant. What matters for my purposes here is that the Main Street sign and the State Street sign are equally faded, and equally far away, and neither so faded or far away that Kate could not—under *normal* practical circumstances—acquire knowledge of which street she is on simply by looking at one of those street signs for a moment. I'm trying to specify a case which is such that: if not for the elevated costs of error, Kate would know that she is on Main and on State, but given the

elevated costs of error concerning her being on Main Street, Kate does not (by the anti-intellectualist's lights) know that she is on Main. The anti-intellectualist is committed to allowing that there is such a case, so I invite him to specify its details. Once we have the case before us, I want the anti-intellectualist to tell me: does Kate know that she is on State but not know that she is on Main?

To answer this question in the affirmative is to bite a big bullet. It seems clearly wrong to say

- (a) Kate knows that she is on State, but she doesn't know that she is on Main.

And it seems clearly right to deny (a). For the sake of plausibility, the anti-intellectualist will want to find a way to avoid affirming (a). (Indeed, (a) is at least as implausible as the denials of closure that Stanley and contextualists alike are concerned to avoid.) In order to avoid affirming (a), he has to say: if the costs of error prevent Kate from knowing that she's on Main Street, then these same costs prevent Kate from knowing that she's on State Street. But of course, the anti-intellectualist doesn't want to say that these same costs prevent Kate from knowing anything at all: despite the high cost of being wrong about Main Street, there are still all sorts of things that Kate can know. The anti-intellectualist has to restrict, somehow, the range of things that Kate is prevented from knowing on account of the elevated cost of her being wrong about Main Street. There are lots of different ways in which the anti-intellectualist might try to do this, but all of them will have a certain form: if the elevated cost of error about Main Street prevents Kate from knowing that she's on Main Street, then those same costs will prevent Kate from knowing anything *of a similar nature* or *in a similar way*. Another way of putting this point is to say the following: if the elevated cost of error about Main Street prevents Kate in our story from knowing that she's on Main Street, then those same costs will prevent Kate from knowing anything by means of *the same method*. Of course, the anti-intellectualist will have to tell us something about how to specify the relevant methods in applying this very abstract formula to cases—she will have to specify the relevant methods finely enough that the high cost of error about being on Main Street does not end up robbing Kate of all of her knowledge. So the relevant method might be something like the following: finding out about such matters as one's location by looking for a moment at a nearby street sign (that is faded to such-and-such an extent, etc.) The anti-intellectualist can now say that, because of the high cost of error, Kate doesn't know that she's on Main, so she doesn't know that she's

on State either. But she still knows, say, that she is standing at an intersection, that her name is “Kate,” that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , and so on.

So let’s suppose that, instead of seeing any street signs, Kate sees a pair of joggers jogging down the street, and then she hears one jogger apparently seriously and sincerely say to the other jogger, “We’ve already gotten to the intersection of Main and State,” as the speaker gestures first at Main Street and then at State. Given how high the stakes are for Kate, this alternative method, we may suppose on the anti-intellectualist’s behalf, cannot give her knowledge of her location. When the stakes are so high, Kate cannot gain knowledge by means of method M’: accepting the apparently serious and sincere, but casual, assertions of passers-by with respect to such matters as one’s location. So the anti-intellectualist will want to say that when the stakes are high, Kate cannot acquire knowledge either by M or by M’. Of course there are a great many different ordinary ways of gaining (what would ordinarily count as) knowledge about what street one is on—one might see houses that are widely known to have a certain distinctive “Main Street” look to them, or one might see that a certain restaurant is called “The Main Street Café,” or one might see a mailbox that reads “The Johnsons, 2617 Main Street,” or one might hear one person telling another to drive straight down Main Street (gesturing at a particular street), and so on. The anti-intellectualist should then say that none of those ordinary methods can, by itself, give Kate knowledge that she is on Main Street, and so none of those same ordinary methods can, by itself, give Kate knowledge that she is on State Street either. And there is nothing very special about the fact that Kate is on State Street: there are plenty of other facts which might be communicated to Kate by means of these same methods: the fact that the next street over is Elm Street, the fact that Elm Street has bigger houses than Orchard Street (a fact that—we may suppose—given her experiential history, Kate can know only if she knows that this street is Orchard and that one is Elm), the fact that Orchard Street is the most polluted street for several blocks, and so on. When the stakes go up, Kate will be prevented from having lots of knowledge, some of which may have nothing to do with whether or not she’s on Main Street.

So far, the anti-intellectualist need not worry much about any of these consequences of her view. But we haven’t yet considered what happens when we conjoin anti-intellectualism with KAP. To do that, let’s now consider how Kate originally came to believe that her life depended upon her getting to Main Street. Suppose that she found out in the following way. By virtue of her high security clearance, Kate has known for many years that the military has been working to synthesize a new lethal nerve gas, formula Z, that is entirely odorless and color-

less, and she knows that terrorists are working to steal the formula and release this nerve gas on the general public. Kate also knows that, if the nerve gas is ever released, the only way that anyone can survive is by hiding in a secret insulated shelter intended solely for private use, the only entrance to which is on Main Street. Kate has never bothered to find out where Main Street is, since she's never had reason to think that she'd need to know: she firmly believes that the only people who've known about this nerve gas are about a dozen high security clearance people, all of whom are good friends of hers, and a couple of geographically distant terrorists. But today as she's walking down the street, she sees two joggers, neither of whom she recognizes, and hears one of them say to the other: "did you hear that formula Z has just been synthesized in the meth lab just down another block here on Main Street? It's really amazing what those meth peddlers are able to do these days." When Kate hears the one jogger say this to the other, she immediately comes to believe that the nerve gas has been synthesized by a local terrorist, who is prone to release it at any moment, or perhaps has already done so. And so she comes to believe that she will soon die if she does not find Main Street right away. Let's stipulate that all of these beliefs are true. Now, Kate believes that she will soon die if she does not find Main Street, but does Kate know that she will soon die if she does not find Main Street? Either she does or she doesn't. Let's consider each disjunct.

If she does know it, then:

Kate knows that the jogger speaks truthfully when he says that formula Z has just been synthesized (for without that knowledge she wouldn't know that she will soon die if she doesn't find Main Street), but she doesn't know that the jogger is correct when he says that this is Main Street.

But that can't be right. Barring some unusual and unspecified feature of the case (e.g., the widespread presence of fake "Main Street" signs around here), if Kate knows that the first conjunct of the jogger's assertion is true, then she also knows that the second conjunct is true.

Might Kate know, by inference to the best explanation of the jogger's speech act, that the jogger is correct when he says that formula Z has just been synthesized? If inference to the best explanation works to give Kate knowledge that formula Z has been synthesized, then there's nothing about our story so far that rules out its giving Kate knowledge that she's on Main Street. But we've stipulated that the case is such that, given her practical circumstances, Kate cannot gain knowledge

that she's on Main Street. Perhaps it is the best explanation of the jogger's speech act that she is on Main Street, but sometimes the best explanation is still not good enough to give one knowledge that its conclusion is true.

So maybe Kate also doesn't know that she will soon die if she does not find Main Street. But in that case, KAP tells us that Kate cannot reasonably act on the premise that she will soon die if she does not find Main Street. Can she nonetheless reasonably search for Main Street on the premise that there is a *chance* that she will soon die if she does not find Main Street? Perhaps, but, given her background knowledge, she could just as easily have known *that* premise about chances even before the jogger's assertion—knowledge of human mortality would suffice. Indeed, we may stipulate, consistently with everything else in our story, that she did know it even before the jogger's assertion, and yet she still reasonably believed that she wouldn't soon die if she didn't know where Main Street was. In fact, if Kate cannot gain knowledge simply by trusting the jogger's casual assertion, then there is nothing that Kate knows that she can use as a premise in practical reasoning that leads to the conclusion that she inquire further into whether she's now on Main Street. And yet, by hypothesis, she doesn't know that she's on Main Street and she confidently believes that it's vitally important for her to find Main Street. Once again, this is clearly wrong: under the circumstances described, Kate can reasonably search desperately for Main Street.

So either Kate does know that she will soon die if she does not find Main Street, or she doesn't. If the former is true, then—the anti-intellectualist will have to grant—she also knows that she's on Main Street. If the latter is true, then—KAP tells us—she cannot reasonably search desperately for Main Street. Each choice is wrong, since each choice implies a falsehood—namely, that Kate can't reasonably continue to search desperately for Main Street.

So either anti-intellectualism is false, or else KAP is false, and in the latter case Stanley's case for anti-intellectualism rests on a false premise. Either way, we should not accept Stanley's case for anti-intellectualism.<sup>4,5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> We can reject KAP without, as Stanley says, devaluing “the role of knowledge in our ordinary conceptual scheme” (Stanley, 2005, 10), because there are some values that knowledge can have only if the KAP is false. For instance, on my view, knowledge is valuable because it is what we're entitled to hold fixed in inquiry. But we can reasonably act on premises that we're not entitled to hold fixed in inquiry. So knowledge can have the value that I believe it has only if it doesn't have the value that KAP implies that it has.

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