

Knowledge by Indifference

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Is it harder to acquire knowledge about things that really matter to us than it is to acquire knowledge about things we don't much care about? Jason Stanley (2005) argues that whether or not the relational predicate "knows that" holds between an agent and a proposition can depend on the practical interests of the agent: the more it *matters* to a person whether *p* is the case, the more justification is required before she counts as *knowing* that *p*.² In Stanley's hands, this can be a compelling thesis, but it is easy to generate cases for which it requires unwelcome knowledge-attributions. The reason, we contend, is that Stanley's thesis, despite its ready appeal, is quite radical: it conflicts with several traditional, and quite plausible, epistemic principles.

1. *Stakes Cases*

Stanley (3-5) uses five cases to make a *prima facie* case for his Interest Relative Invariantism (IRI) about knowledge. In the two cases that interest us here, Hannah and her wife Sarah are debating whether to brave the Friday afternoon lines at their bank:

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² Subsequently, parenthetical references to Stanley will be to Stanley (2005).

Low Stakes

Realizing that it isn't very important that their paycheques are deposited right away, Hannah says, "I know the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on a Saturday morning. So we can deposit our paycheques tomorrow morning."

High Stakes

Since they have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their paycheques by Saturday. Hannah notes that she was at the bank two weeks before on a Saturday morning, and it was open. But, as Sarah points out, banks do change their hours. Hannah says, "I guess you're right. I don't know that the bank will open tomorrow."

According to Stanley (5) Hannah is right in both cases: in *Low Stakes* her claim to *know* is true, and in *High Stakes*, her claim *not* to know is true. If you agree, you may incline, with Stanley (85), to the thought that "whether or not someone knows that *p* may be determined in part by practical facts about the subject's environment." And if you are so inclined, you are inclined towards embracing the thought behind IRI.

As Stanley (6) elaborates:

the facts as to whether the relevant attributer can truly describe the predicate 'knows the bank will be open' to the relevant subject vary. Furthermore, the facts vary in accord with the *importance* to some person – either the knowledge attributer or the putative knower – of the bank's being open. This provides a *prima facie* case for the thesis that knowledge is not just a matter of non-practical facts, but is also a matter of *how much is at stake*.

Stanley (88) does not claim that IRI is a *theory* of knowledge; as we read him, he proposes IRI as a *constraint* on theories of knowledge, which a diversity of theories may meet – or fail to meet.

Stanley illustrates the constraint with the following account of knowledge, which we will refer to as *the IRI account*:

Knows ($\langle x, w, t, p \rangle$) if and only if

- (1) p is true at w
- (2) $\sim p$ is not a serious epistemic possibility for x at w and t
- (3) If p is a serious practical question for x at t , then $\sim p$ has a sufficiently low epistemic probability, given x 's total evidence
- (4) x believes at t that p on the basis of non-inferential evidence, or believes that p on the basis of competent inference from propositions that are known by x at t .

Instances of this schema are obtained by replacing the letters 'x', 'w', 't' and 'p' with the names of persons, worlds, times, and propositions respectively. Clause (3), with its notion of a "serious practical question," provides the required sensitivity to practical facts.

According to Stanley (92) "a proposition is a serious practical question for a subject, if there are alternatives to that proposition that the subject ought rationally to consider in decision making." He suggests three features, each of which can prevent a proposition from counting as a serious practical question: if it is relatively unlikely to occur, if the subject cannot effect whether it will occur, and "if the actions I would take if

I knew it would occur would not result in a substantial improvement in my life over the plan of action I already intended to pursue”(93).³

On Stanley’s conception, then, the difference between *Low Stakes* and *High Stakes* is that in *Low Stakes* the proposition that the bank is closed on Saturdays is not a serious practical question for Hannah; it is not a proposition which she ought rationally to consider in her deliberations, perhaps because the actions she would take if she knew it would not result in a substantial improvement in her life over the plan she already intends to pursue. In *High Stakes* the proposition that the bank is closed on Saturdays *is* a serious practical question for Hannah, because the practical facts are different: Hannah and Sarah have important bills due, so the actions Hannah would take if she knew that the bank would be closed on Saturday (braving the lines on Friday) would result in a substantial improvement in her life (bills paid) over the consequences of sticking to her original plan (bounced cheques).

This all seems pretty sensible. But the cases cut both ways:

2. Indifference Cases

Deadbeat

Ded, a notorious slacker, is wondering whether to brave the Friday afternoon lines, or return to the bank (late) Saturday morning, and deposit a cheque he has just received from selling his (broken) Harley. His roommate Alfie, lounging in

³ From this list of features it seems clear that although Stanley develops the notion of a serious practical question in terms of propositions, he also sometimes applies it to events.

the passenger seat of Ded's pickup, points out that banks sometimes do change their hours, and given that their rent is due, failure to make a deposit will likely result in yet another bounced cheque to their landlord, whose patience has already been strained to the breaking point. Ded responds, "Chill dude, I know the bank will be open tomorrow, I was there on Saturday two weeks ago, and even if I bounce another cheque to the landlord, we can just skip town -- I'm sick of this Podunk anyway." Inhaling deeply, Alfie nods his agreement.

Ded and Alfie are in the same position as Hannah and Sarah, except that for them the practical facts are different. Ded couldn't care less whether the bank is open tomorrow---he might well not take any actions that would result in a "substantial improvement in his life" if he knew the bank would be closed---so it is not a serious practical question for him. Thanks to Ded's indifference, the condition specified in clause (3) of Stanley's account is trivially satisfied. Since Ded and Alfie are otherwise in the same position as Hannah and Sarah, IRI entails Ded is right to say that he knows that the bank is open tomorrow.

This looks to be an awkward consequence. Even if you don't have reservations about Ded's ascription being true, you should have reservations, we submit, about what *makes* it true: not giving a damn, however enviable in other respects, should not be knowledge- making.

One way to begin motivating this reservation is by appeal to reliabilist scruples (e.g. Goldman 1967). Indifference, one might think, should not count as part of a reliable process: very often, one suspects, indifference like Ded's is implicated in false beliefs. The defender of practical interest theories could bite the bullet here and assert that

indifference *is* reliable in the relevant sense, but this looks a mouthful. Given a constraint like IRI, and given the extent to which cases like Deadbeat can be expected to proliferate, indifference *will be* reliably implicated in knowledge. And now knowledge---on the IRI account---doesn't look like much to get excited about. Whether or not one is a reliabilist, it is plausible to think that knowledge is an *achievement*, and that beliefs bearing the honorific "knowledge" enjoy special *prestige* in cognitive endeavors (see Kvanvig 2003). But as the story is now developing, this thought is slipping away, since any lucky guess that the enquirer doesn't care about is entitled the honorific.

It might be argued that the proposition that the bank is closed on Saturday is, after all, a serious practical question for Ded. As Stanley (92) has it, "[a] proposition is a serious practical question for an agent, if there are alternatives to that proposition that the subject *ought rationally to consider* in decision making" (our italics). As usual, it is not easy to determine the bite of rational oughts, but it is very plausible to suppose that Ded is not so bitten. Given his desires – or lack of desires -- there's not much rational pressure for him to consider alternatives to the bank's being open.

There are questions as to what desires Ded rationally ought to have, and there is also considerable difficulty in seeing how to rationally decide such questions. But even if Ded's indifference could be shown practically irrational – perhaps the best theory of practical rationality favors the uptight -- it's not difficult to construct other troublesome cases:

Richboy

Richie, the trust fund baby, is wondering whether to brave the Friday afternoon lines, or return to the bank Saturday (late) morning, and deposit a cheque he has

just received from his parents. His roommate Tad, lounging in the passenger seat of Richie's Hummer, points out that banks sometimes do change their hours, and given that their rent is due, failure to make a deposit will likely result in yet another bounced cheque to their landlord, whose patience has already been strained to the breaking point. Richie responds, "Chill dude, I know the bank will be open, I was there last week, and even if I bounce a cheque, my parents and I can buy that dump of an apartment building." Inhaling deeply, Tad nods his agreement.

Richie is so obscenely wealthy that that the costs of bouncing a cheque are altogether negligible; something the more prudent among us might want to deny for Ded. Richie (or his stooges) could simply buy the landlord's management company (or the bank) if there's trouble over a bounced cheque; why should he be anything *but* indifferent as to whether the bank is open on Saturday? (The reader is free to add any tweaks about the ease of getting to the bank, the emptiness of Richie's Saturday mornings, etc., that she thinks are needed.)

Matters are now even dodgier for practical interest accounts, because *money* turns out to be knowledge making. Of course, money may buy the *instruments* of knowledge--perhaps more can be learned in fancy labs---but here the connection between money and knowledge seems rather too direct. On Stanley's view, it seems that money may improve someone's *epistemic* circumstances without there being a corresponding change in their

evidential circumstances.⁴ Money buying knowledge may not offend as much as money buying love, but it may well offend. Especially if that purchase is abrupt:

Jackpot

Since they have an impending bill and very little in their account, it is very important to Hannah and Sarah that they deposit their paycheques by Saturday. Hannah says, “I know the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on a Saturday morning. So we can deposit our paycheques tomorrow morning.” But, as Sarah points out, banks do change their hours. Hannah then says, “I guess you’re right. I don’t know that the bank will be open tomorrow.” However, as they drive past the bank, the local station playing on their car radio announces the winning numbers for a record setting lottery jackpot. The numbers match those on the ticket Hannah purchased earlier in the week, and Hannah and Sarah are now, to their delight, obscenely wealthy.

This case starts out like Stanley’s *High Stakes* case, and so it seems that, by IRI lights, we should judge that Hannah starts out *not knowing* that the bank will be open on Saturday. Yet the IRI account must say that Hannah *comes to know* that the bank will be open when she strikes it rich: just like in Richie’s case, it is no longer a serious practical question

⁴ We mean “evidence” to be construed broadly, to include both inferential and observational processes.

whether the bank is open, so the condition specified in clause (3) of the IRI account is trivially satisfied.⁵

But winning the lottery doesn't look a likely candidate for a knowledge-maker. In this case IRI seems to violate a *stability condition*, maintained by various thinkers since Plato (*Meno* 97a-98a), to the effect that knowledge, unlike mere opinion, should be relatively resistant to fluctuation. But on IRI, it's not: just as Hannah can win knowledge in the instant of a lottery drawing, she can lose it in the instant her drug addled little sister, who has stolen her ATM card, drains her account at a cash machine across town.

On accounts like IRI, the rich apparently know a great deal more about mundane matters – such as whether the bank is open on Saturdays – simply because such matters are not as crucial to their practical interests. By contrast, the poor may know a lot more about the best investing strategies for multinational corporations, the safety records of light aircraft, and the relative charms of old Bordeauxs in large format bottlings. Moreover, the callous and racist know more about the sufferings caused by prejudice, the flaky and thick-skinned about how their friends feel, and the fickle and faithless about the steadfastness of their lovers. (Stanley's view carries one welcome implication for those of

⁵ In fact Stanley's remarks on his "Ignorant High Stakes" (5) case suggest that Hannah will suddenly come to know that the bank is open on Saturday when she wins the lottery, *even if Hannah and Sarah have the radio turned off and have yet to learn that they have won.*

us toiling away in the American interior: our colleagues employed in more glamorous coastal regions may, by virtue of higher costs of living, actually know less than we do!)⁶

Furthermore, if we combine these consequences of IRI with the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion, i.e. that one should assert only what one knows, we get more strange consequences. For example, while an indifferent agent might be more likely to *know* mundane facts about a subject matter than a deeply invested one, it won't follow that their sincere *testimony* is more likely to be reliable than that of their more caring counterpart, since the indifferent agent can acquire license to assert based on much flimsier evidence. Understanding this, you should hold the indifferent agent's testimony to be worth less than that of his highly invested counterpart, but it's strange to think this, and also that the indifferent agent is more likely to *know*.

Such embarrassments could be concocted until (long after!) we grew bored. Like Stanley (12-13), we don't contend that the responses we favour for our cases are indefeasible, and we don't take our cases to be, *by themselves*, decisive.⁷ But something has gone squirrely here. What the cases indicate is that accounts like IRI, if endorsed,

⁶ Thanks to Ric Otte for this bit of good cheer.

⁷ Many philosophers, especially those influenced by cognitive science, have expressed serious reservations regarding the philosophical potency of a "method of cases" involving "appeal to intuitions" (e. g., Weinberg et al. 2001; Bishop and Trout 2005; Doris and Stich 2005). But even if one shares these reservations, it does not affect our argument, for the cases we develop may be understood as "heuristics" highlighting the conflict of Stanley's approach with the epistemic principles we shall presently adduce.

force us to jettison some highly plausible general convictions about knowledge. For example:

- Knowledge is not unduly dependent on luck (Klein 1971: 471-2; Dancy 1985: 23; Greco 2003: 111; Riggs 2002: 93-4; Sosa 1991: 277).
- Knowledge is generally associated with reliable processes (Goldman 1967, Alston 1995, Plantinga 1993).
- Knowledge is a norm of assertion (Unger 1975, Williamson 2000)
- Testimony transmits knowledge (Coady 1994, Schaffer 2006)
- Attributions of knowledge confer prestige on beliefs (Kvanvig 2003).
- Knowledge is relatively stable (Williamson 2000: 78-80).

One might have reservations about one or another of these principles. We ourselves do. And no doubt with sufficient ingenuity, awkward cases can be generated for each of them. But on an account like IRI, they *all* go by the board. That, it seems to us, is a lot of going by the board. Indeed, these difficulties make tempting the following principle: *No changes in one's epistemic circumstances without changes in one's evidential circumstances*. We won't here argue for this principle. But its prima facie appeal is obvious enough to cause hesitation in embracing any view that entails its negation, as IRI apparently does.

Of course, not everyone sees particular theoretical costs as equally costly. Perhaps the revisionism IRI requires is not a bug but a feature: Grice is reported to have said, "that's not an objection to my theory, that's my theory," and perhaps Stanley is

willing to say something like that here.⁸ But it should now be clear that there are good philosophical reasons – whether or not they are philosophically overriding reasons – for Stanley’s (6) foil, the epistemological “intellectualist,” to distinguish sharply between epistemic and practical considerations, in just the way that Stanley counsels against doing.⁹

3. Epistemic Possibilities

It may be tempting to deny that our indifference cases are as similar to Stanley’s stakes cases as we have maintained. We’ve claimed, in effect, that the only relevant difference between *Deadbeat* and *High Stakes* concerns clause (3). But one might respond that Ded’s indifference also affects whether his situation meets the condition specified by clause (2), the *serious epistemic possibility condition*. Here’s how the story might go: the bank not being open Saturday *is* a serious epistemic possibility for Ded; he just fails to treat it as such, so that his indifference, rather than being implicated in knowledge, explains his lack of knowledge. This sort of unhappy state, Stanley might suppose, will be a typical result of indifference. Indifference will often be implicated in failure to consider epistemically relevant possibilities, and that’s what motivates the thought that indifference is not (usually) knowledge making.

⁸ Perhaps not: Stanley (v) avows “a philosophical tendency to preserve as much as possible of common-sense intuition.”

⁹ For persuasive argument in favor of maintaining a distinction between “practical rationality” and “epistemic rationality,” see Heil (1983: esp. 754, 757-8).

We have reservations.

First, note that there are actually *two* differences between Stanley's *Low* and *High Stakes*. In addition to the raised stakes for which *High Stakes* is named, there is a second change from the *Low Stakes* scenario: Sarah (like our Alfie and Tad) pointing out that banks sometimes do change their hours. This addition might make the bank not being open Saturday a "serious epistemic possibility." While we hesitate to speculate about the contours and origins of the responses audiences have to cases, it is not implausible to suppose that this difference is impacting responses as much (or more) as the difference in stakes.

Second, it would be useful to have some explication of "serious epistemic possibility." Stanley (91) offers a paragraph of discussion, where he suggests that the notion is vague, and gives the example of an "objective (or epistemic) probability of 50 percent or over" as clearly meeting the standard. But it seems clear that lower probabilities would do – 1 in 5, say, or even 1 in 10---something like the lifetime lung cancer risk faced by smokers.

And now there's trouble. For while clause (2) may block some indifference cases, it does *too much* work. Consider a conscientious and fair-minded scientist – of the sort that might be celebrated in virtue epistemology (e.g. Zagzebski 1996) – who believes her hypothesis on the basis of convincing evidence, but sensibly allows that some competing hypothesis, while not so well supported, and on the whole not highly probable, is still in the hunt. Conscientious Scientist, one fears, can know very little in her area of expertise, for she often – admirably - treats credible hypotheses contradicting hers as serious epistemic possibilities. Compare Conscientious Scientist's evil twin, Raving Dogmatist,

who is steadfastly disinclined to treat rival hypotheses as serious epistemic possibilities. IRI now seems to have another peculiar result: epistemic virtue is implicated in ignorance, and epistemic vice in knowledge. Maybe this result is not entirely unappealing. Witness an old saw of graduate science education: a good investigator is one who disbelieves the data when it conflicts with her theory.¹⁰ Still, we've come to an odd place. As the various stakes cases seem to show, interest destroys knowledge and indifference creates it. This result, perhaps, can be resisted on Stanley's overall account by appeal to serious epistemic possibility. But now another difficulty emerges: conscientiousness impedes the attainment of knowledge and dogmatism supports it.

Perhaps these implications are not unduly costly, and perhaps the benefits of practical interest theories can be shown to outweigh the costs. But if we are right about the problem of knowledge by indifference, such approaches should be shown to earn very handsome theoretical returns.

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¹⁰ As reported to us by Rob Woolfolk.

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