**Book Proposal**

Title: Knowledge: A Human Interest Story

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**Abstract**

This book defends the view that knowledge is interest-relative. That is, what someone knows depends not just on what they believe, what their evidence is, whether their beliefs are true, or relations between belief, evidence, and truth, but what they are using these beliefs for.

The key thought, one that goes back to classical Nyāya epistemologies, is that knowledge rationalizes action. If you know that *p*, it makes sense to use *p* as a fixed point in your inquiries, and to act on the result of those inquiries. But for almost anything we purportedly know, there is some action that it wouldn't rationalise. I know what I had for breakfast, but I wouldn't take a bet at billion to one odds about it. Knowledge has practical limits.

Other philosophers have defended versions of the view described in the previous paragraph, and while those views have been very widely discussed, they haven’t been very widely accepted. I think most of the objections that other philosophers can be answered by a careful formulation of the view, and that’s one aim of this book. A larger aim is to show how the view, properly understood, makes sense of the role of knowledge in inquiry, in everyday life, and (though the book only makes a start on this project) in the history of thought.

My version of the view that knowledge is interest-relative differs from similar views in the literature in four respects. First, it says that people lose knowledge not when they go into so-called “high stakes” situations (e.g., when a million dollars is at stake), but when they go into “long odds” situations, where it would only make sense to act on their knowledge if the probability that they were right was incredibly close to 1. Second, I argue that the reason knowledge is sensitive to what one is interested in because of constraints on the proper places to start inquiry, not on the proper places to end inquiry. Third, I argue that the constraints just mentioned are not the constraints that would apply to an ideal inquirer trying to precisely maximise expected utility, but to an ordinary, computationally limited, human inquirer. And finally, I argue that the reasons for thinking that knowledge is interest-relative generalize, and imply that belief, rational belief, and evidence, are all interest-relative.

I’ve defended some of these claims in various papers over the last couple of decades, but I’ve changed my mind on a lot of the details (including the last three points in the previous paragraph). And I now think there are much better ways to express the thoughts I was trying to communicate back then, and that the papers I wrote often left it rather unclear how they were meant to fit together. So this book aims to present a unified theory that builds on those earlier works.

**Chapter by Chapter Guide**

After a brief preface, the book has 10 chapters.

*Chapter 1 – Overture*

This chapter summarises the themes of the book, with an emphasis on how they connect to some infrequently discussed events in the history of philosophy. In particular, it discusses how the idea that what knows varies depending on what one is inquiring into interacts with these four events. First, the idea from late Ancient sceptics such as Philo of Larissa that scepticism needs to be paired with a notion of when something can sensibly taken for granted in everyday life. Second, the medieval discussions of when a jurist will be forgiven in the afterlife if they have sentenced an innocent person. Third, the early modern discussions of what standards should be applied to publishing in the new invention: the scientific journal. And fourth, the classical Nyāya arguments that respond to the sceptic by highlighting the practical role of knowledge. The aim here is not to produce a particularly scholarly work; most of the references are to secondary or even tertiary literature. It’s rather to show how different the theory of knowledge looks if one starts with something other than the standard Plato-to-Descartes-to-Russell canon, and in particular how *practical* knowledge looks from this alternative angle.

*Chapter 2 – Interests*

This chapter sets out the primary argument that knowledge is interest-relative. It describes a simple kind of game, and argues that orthodox philosophical approaches to knowledge are committed to judging clearly irrational ways to play the game to be rational. It also sets out more carefully just what the interest-relative view is, and what the orthodox view it seeks to overturn is, as well as describe two other alternatives (to both interest-relativity and orthodoxy) that should be considered.

*Chapter 3 – Belief*

This chapter argues that belief is interest-relative for the following reason. A big part of what it is to believe that *p* is to be willing to use *p* as a starting point in inquiries. But for most people, for most of their beliefs, there will be some inquiry where they won’t start with that belief. For example, the inquiry into whether they might have made a mistake in forming that very belief. There is a tension here, and the best way to resolve it is to say that when they are going about ordinary life, they have the belief, but they lose it when they turn to more unusual inquiries about their own reliability.

*Chapter 4 – Knowledge*

This chapter sets out how the moves from the previous two chapters combine to generate a theory of knowledge. Oddly, given its centrality, it is one of the shortest chapters in the book, but this is because once the parts are in place they all slot together fairly easily. A big focus of the chapter is how this view of knowledge meshes with the idea that we can extend our knowledge by logical deduction, since it has been widely argued that the kind of view I’m defending has a problem with this.

*Chapter 5 – Inquiry*

On my theory, if something is known, it is available to use as a starting point in inquiry. I used to think this meant I was committed to agreeing with Jane Friedman that it is incoherent to inquire into something one knows. But I’ve come to see that this isn’t right; depending on what one wants to do in an inquiry one may want to deliberately set aside some premises. In And that might mean inquiry into what one already knows, what we ordinarily call double-checking, is reasonable. This fact is used to respond to an influential objection by Jessica Brown to the style of argument I use in chapter 2.

*Chapter 6 – Ties*

In this chapter I respond to an objection that theories like mine are committed to implausible closure failures in cases where choosers have very similar options to choose between. I show that the objections rely on the assumption that the chooser aims to maximise expected utility, and this isn’t the right criteria of correctness for decisions in close call situations. It isn’t true that when one is selecting cans off the supermarket shelf, one’s selection is rational iff it is utility maximising. Rather, the rational chooser in such a situation will adopt a strategy that has the best long-run consequences. In this case, the strategy will probably be something like the strategy of picking arbitrarily unless it is clear that one of the choices is defective. Given a theory of rational choice that emphasizes the importance of decision making strategies, rather than the importance of utility maximisation, my preferred epistemological theory gets the right answers. There are two traps to avoid here: closure failure and scepticism. And the focus on strategies, and on choices by ordinary humans not by idealized utility maximisers, lets us avoid both.

*Chapter 7 – Changes*

In this chapter I respond to the frequently voiced objection that interest-relative theories lead to implausible verdicts about pairs of situations where knowledge is lost or gained due to what looks like an irrelevant feature of a situation. I have two responses to these objections. First, I argue that the intuitions are about what makes it the case that a person does or doesn’t know something, and the arguments from these examples moves too quickly from a claim about modal variation to a claim about making. The second response is, I think, more compelling, and borrowed from unpublished work by Nilanjan Das. These objections over-generate. Every theory of how to avoid Gettier-style cases leads to pairs of cases where a person gains or loses knowledge depending on factors that seem ‘irrelevant’. So it’s not an objection to my view that it has the same consequences as every plausible theory of knowledge.

*Chapter 8 – Rationality*

This chapter and the next are considerably more technical than the earlier chapters, which is partially why they are so late in the book. They also have the most overlap with the journal articles I’ve previously written on this topic.

This chapter goes over my theory of rational belief. Surprisingly, and in contrast to the view defended by Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, interests affect rational belief in a very different way to how they effect knowledge. On my view, but not theirs, someone who has mistaken, and irrational, beliefs about what practical situation they are facing can easily have a rational, true belief that is not knowledge. This chapter also tidies up some loose ends from chapter 3 concerning the so-called ‘Lockean’ theory of belief.

*Chapter 9 – Evidence*

This chapter sets out my interest-relative theory of evidence. I argue that one’s evidence just is what a radical interpreter would say one’s evidence is. But, I go on to argue, in some cases that means we end up playing a kind of coordination game with the radical interpreter. What our evidence is turns on what the right solution to that game. And the solution is interest-relative, but not in the way that knowledge is, nor in the way that rational belief is.

*Chapter 10 – Power*

This chapter ends the book with a short note connected interest-relativity to the familiar saying *Knowledge is Power*. I argue that this saying only makes sense on an interest-relative view of knowledge. If interest-relative theories were flawed for one reason or another, then we’d have to simply concede that the saying is false. But we shouldn’t concede that; the saying is true, and interest-relative epistemology explains why it is true.

**Readership**

This is primarily targeted at other academic philosophers, but within that group I think it should have a fairly wide readership. There are two reasons for thinking this. One is that the papers it builds on have been pretty prominent. My earliest work on this, a paper called “Can We Do Without Pragmatic Encroachment” has (according to Google Scholar), 245 citations, and a more recent paper, “Knowledge, Bets and Interests”, has 143 citations. These are fairly high numbers, but there are reasons for thinking a book would do even better.

The idea that knowledge is interest-relative was really introduced to recent philosophy by three books in the 2000s: John Hawthorne’s *Knowledge and Lotteries*, Jason Stanley’s *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, and Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath’s *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*. On Google Scholar, these three books average 1500 citations. The field they launched is its own category on PhilPapers, the main index for philosophy papers. That field, Pragmatic and Moral Encroachment, has 322 papers in it, 44 since 2022 alone. So it’s a pretty thriving field, and I think this book would end up taking a central place in it.

The book is also written in a way that it could be used as a textbook in an upper-level undergraduate epistemology class. Chapters 8 and (especially) 9 would probably be too much to assign to students in such a class, which is partially why I’ve pushed them to the back of the book. But the book is (I think) at the same level of generality and accessibility as the kinds of books that are assigned in upper level classes, and I think it could get some uptake there as well.

**Additional Information**

The book is about 104,000 words all up, including footnotes, references, etc.

It has 16 tables, most of them pretty small (often just 2\*2 tables), and no other graphs, charts, diagrams, etc. It doesn’t have any audiovisual components.

There is a completed manuscript ready. I’ve attached a PDF, though personally I find the easiest version to read is the in-browser version at https://brian.weatherson.org/kahis.

**Grants**

I’m not sure if I am eligible for *grants*, but I do have some research funds that I certainly would be eligible to use for a traditional fee. I am fairly confident that if it was made clear what it was for, I could use these research funds to contribute to the work that you do.

**Author Info**

I’m the Marshall M. Weinberg Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan. My previous books are *Normative Externalism* (OUP, 2019), and *A History of Philosophy Journals, Volume 1: Evidence from Topic Modeling, 1876-2013* (Michigan Publishing, 2022). I have over 60 journal articles and book chapters; information about them is at <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=rz5RF8kAAAAJ>, and pre-publication drafts of them are at <https://brian.weatherson.org/html-papers/>.

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