

STUDIES IN THEORETICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Knowledge, Stakes and Error

A Psychological Account




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To my family

Preface

The present book grew out of my dissertation *Epistemic Invariantism and Contextualist Intuitions*, which I wrote from 2010 to 2014 at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. In the dissertation, I basically argued that the kinds of intuitions that are typically used to motivate familiar views like epistemic contextualism and anti-intellectualism are best explained in terms of variations in mundane epistemic factors. The relevant case pairs (e.g. the bank cases) are supposed to hold these factors fixed, but they don't. This is still the general spirit of the present book. Everything else has changed.

One of the main reasons for my continued interest in the topic was the rise of experimental philosophy. More and more studies came out as I was writing the dissertation. I didn't properly incorporate them because I was too far along in the process. But these results couldn't be ignored in the kind of project I eventually found myself pursuing, namely, the project of understanding why we, ordinary speakers, ascribe and deny knowledge in the way we do. After finishing the dissertation, I felt that now everything had to be redone, this time with an eye not just on intuitions but also on the vast body of experimental literature that by then had come into existence. The present book is the result.

I would like to thank many people for helping me along the way. I'm extremely grateful to Geert Keil and Dan López de Sa for their excellent supervision of my dissertation and continued support. I'm also very grateful to Jessica Brown for valuable feedback on my dissertation. Many people have helped me by discussing and commenting on individual chapters or even smaller units. I hope the following list is reasonably complete, and I apologize for any omissions: Peter Baumann, Sebastian Bender, Elke Brendel, Michael Blome-Tillmann, Guillermo Del Pinal, Davide Fassio, Jie Gao, Mikkel Gerken, Michael Hannon, Nat Hansen, Christoph Jäger, Markus Kneer, Dirk Kindermann, Beate Krickel, David Lanius, David Löwenstein, Andrew Peet, Patricia Rich, Jonathan Schaffer, Erik Stei, Greg Stoutenburg, Emanuel Viebahn, the members of Benjamin Schnieder's, Geert Keil's and Thomas Kroedel's and Moritz Schulz's research colloquia, audiences at various workshops and conferences and many anonymous referees. I'm also very grateful to Josh Knobe for introducing me to the methods of experimental philosophy. I'm more than grateful to Roman Heil and Sergiu Spatan for discussing almost the entire manuscript with me. I would like to thank John Horden for his careful and thorough copy-editing of the manuscript. Most of all, I'm

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A large part of the research for this book was carried out in the context of the project “The semantics and pragmatics of knowledge claims,” which I led at the Universität Hamburg from 2016 to 2019. Funding from the *German Research Foundation* (DI 2172/1-1) is gratefully acknowledged. Chapter 6 is based on my paper “Knowledge and availability” (*Philosophical Psychology*, 31/4, 2018, 554–573), and the relevant passages are reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd). Chapter 6 also draws on some ideas from my paper “Epistemic invariantism and contextualist intuitions” (*Episteme*, 13/2, 2016, 219–232). The discussions of anti-intellectualism, the moderate conversational implicature account and the skeptical loose use account in chapters 5 and 7 update ideas from my papers “Anti-intellectualism, egocentrism and bank case intuitions” (*Philosophical Studies*, 175/, 2018, 2841–2857), “Knowledge, intuition and implicature” (*Synthese*, 195/6, 2018, 2821–2843) and “Skeptical pragmatic invariantism: Good, but not good enough” (*Synthese*, 193/8, 2016, 2577–2593).

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Introduction

Knowledge ascriptions figure prominently in everyday discourse. Questions like “Do you know what time it is?” are common. And responses like “I do, it’s 3pm” come no less naturally to us. We don’t just make knowledge ascriptions all the time. They profoundly affect what we do and how we behave. If I know that you don’t like Hannah, I won’t invite the both of you for dinner together. And if I don’t know whether it’s going to rain, I might pack an umbrella just in case. The importance of knowledge ascriptions is hard to overestimate, and an understanding of their workings is bound to widen our overall understanding of the human condition.

The present book aims to explain one central aspect of our knowledge-ascribing practice, namely, its sensitivity to what are sometimes called *non-epistemic factors*, i.e. factors such as what is at stake and which error-possibilities we happen to have in mind. To illustrate the phenomenon, suppose you read in a train schedule that your train leaves at 3pm. It’s natural to think that you can come to know that the train leaves at 3pm on this basis. Such judgments begin to waver though, once you learn that your life depends on the matter, or once you are reminded that the schedule could contain a misprint.

The dependence of knowledge ascriptions on non-epistemic factors is puzzling. Prominent accounts appeal to highly controversial views about the semantics of knowledge ascriptions or the metaphysics of knowledge. Epistemic contextualists, for instance, suggest that the term “know” can express different epistemic relations and that non-epistemic factors determine which of these relations is expressed. Anti-intellectualists, on the other hand, suggest that knowledge metaphysically depends on non-epistemic factors just as it depends on epistemic factors such as one’s evidence.

The goal of this book is to offer a novel and more conservative account of the data. The psychological literature on judgment and decision-making shows that our estimates of probability are affected by a number of irrelevant factors, such as how the event in question is described, or how problematic it

is to under- or overestimate the relevant probability. I will argue that these psychological effects on probability estimates give rise to the effects of non-epistemic factors on knowledge ascriptions. A mediating assumption will be that knowledge requires a high probability of truth. Semantic and metaphysical commitments like contextualism and anti-intellectualism become unnecessary.

Related accounts have been suggested in the literature. Vogel (1990: 19–20), Hawthorne (2004a: 162–166) and Williamson (2005a: 226), for instance, all point to the idea that non-epistemic factors psychologically affect judgments of risk, and thereby affect knowledge judgments. Their account is insufficiently general though, in that it applies only to a limited range of non-epistemic factors, namely, presented error-possibilities. And even as applied in this limited domain, it faces severe concerns (Nagel, 2010b). Moreover, this account was proposed before the recent surge of experimental literature on knowledge ascriptions, and therefore needs to be reassessed in light of these novel results. I will meet these challenges.

It should be noted that my account exemplifies a relatively underappreciated style of approach towards recalcitrant linguistic data. Linguistic data can often be accommodated via semantic or metaphysical resources. This isn't always possible, however, and the familiar go-to resource in such cases is conversational pragmatics. We sometimes don't mean (just) what we say, and when that's the case, our usage doesn't fully reflect our semantic and metaphysical commitments (Grice, 1989). Appeals to the psychology of underlying judgments are far less common. They can still be respectable though, as I hope the subsequent discussion helps to bring out (see Nagel (2008, 2010b) and Gerken (2017) for kindred approaches).

Outline of the book

Chapters 2 and 3 present the data I aim to explain. Chapter 2 presents relevant intuitions had by philosophers and ends by taking a critical stance towards them. This motivates my presentation of experimental results in chapter 3. I distinguish *error-possibility effects* on knowledge ascriptions from *pragmatic effects* on knowledge ascriptions. I discuss the extent to which these effects have and haven't been confirmed, adding some studies of my own to fill some gaps. Chapter 4 introduces *insensitivism* as a default theory of the semantics of knowledge ascriptions and the metaphysics of knowledge. Insensitivism is roughly the denial of both contextualism and anti-intellectualism. This view serves as a vantage point for discussing candidate accounts of the effects of

non-epistemic factors on knowledge ascriptions. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss various possible explanations of *error-possibility effects*. Chapter 5 presents the most prominent extant accounts, including relevant versions of contextualism, anti-intellectualism, conversational implicature accounts, loose use accounts and doxastic accounts, along with the recent focal bias account. I raise concerns for each of these positions and thus motivate my search for a novel approach. Chapter 6 presents the approach I favor. Appealing to the psychological phenomenon of *subadditivity*, I argue that mentioning error-possibilities affects probability estimates and thereby affects judgments of knowledge. Chapters 7 and 8 discuss candidate explanations of *pragmatic effects* on knowledge ascriptions. Chapter 7 discusses prominent accounts from the literature. Again, these include relevant versions of contextualism, anti-intellectualism, conversational implicature accounts, loose use accounts and doxastic accounts. I also discuss the more recent heuristic proxy account. I argue that these views all face challenges. Chapter 8 presents my own preferred account of pragmatic effects on knowledge ascriptions. I use the idea of an *asymmetric loss function* to explain why pragmatic factors affect judgments of probability and thereby affect knowledge judgments. Chapter 9 concludes the book.

Notes on terminology

This book is exclusively concerned with what may be called *propositional* knowledge, that is, the kind of knowledge we ascribe or deny when we say things like “Hannah knows *that/whether* we are coming” or “Peter doesn’t know *that/whether* Sarah is talking about him behind his back.” There may also be other kinds of knowledge. For instance, there may be *practical* knowledge, which we may ascribe or deny when we say things like “Hannah knows *how* to ride a bicycle” or “Peter doesn’t know *how* to fix a broken tail-light.” There may also be what one could call *personal* knowledge, as in “I know you” or “You don’t know her.” I will leave these other kinds of knowledge aside, and I will use the term “knowledge” to refer to propositional knowledge only.¹

In talking about (propositional) knowledge, I will use the following familiar terminology. “S” will be used as a place-holder for an arbitrary expression denoting a subject that may be said to know or fail to know this or that proposition. Thus “S” could be instantiated by “I,” “you,” “Socrates,” “Michelle

¹ There is a question concerning just how distinct the supposedly different kinds of knowledge are. Some authors argue that practical knowledge reduces to propositional knowledge (and similar debates could presumably be had about personal knowledge). See Fantl, 2017 for an overview of this debate.

Obama,” etc. Meanwhile, “p” will be used as a place-holder for an arbitrary declarative sentence. One instance of the sentence form “S knows that p” could thus be “Michelle knows that she still has two miles to go.”

Unless otherwise indicated, I will use the term “utterance” to refer to a sentence as used in a given context. Take, for instance, the sentence “I know that Goethe was born in 1749” as used by me right now. The sentence as used in this context is an utterance, or an utterance *of the sentence* “*I know that Goethe was born in 1749.*” Thus, when I say that this utterance is true or false, I will mean that the sentence as used in the given context is true or false.² I will refer to utterances of sentences of the form “S knows/doesn’t know that p” as “knowledge utterances.” Among knowledge utterances, I will distinguish “knowledge ascriptions” from “knowledge denials,” depending on whether the uttered sentence has positive or negative form. For aesthetic reasons, I will often use “knowledge ascriptions” when it would be more precise to use the more technical “knowledge utterances.”

² See e.g. López de Sa, 2009: 5n7 for the idea of construing utterances in this way.

Intuitive Data

The main goal of this book is to explain the effects of a certain range of non-epistemic factors on our knowledge-ascribing practice. This chapter and the following chapter describe these effects in detail. This will form the background for the later chapters where I aim to explain them.

It will be useful to have a label for the non-epistemic factors that supposedly affect knowledge ascriptions. These include both pragmatic factors, such as what is at stake, and various factors related to the presentation of error-possibilities. I will correspondingly call them *PEP factors*; where “P” stands for pragmatic factors, such as what is at stake, and “EP” stands for factors relating to the presentation of *error-possibilities*, and I will call their effects on knowledge ascriptions *PEP effects*.

PEP effects come in two related forms that should be carefully distinguished. On the one hand, we find sensitivity to PEP factors in intuitions about imagined cases voiced by philosophers working in the field. I will refer to these effects as *intuitive* PEP effects. On the other hand, we find sensitivity to PEP factors in ordinary speakers’ judgments as elicited in experimental studies. I will refer to these effects as *experimental* PEP effects.

This chapter deals with intuitive PEP effects. I will ultimately express my doubt that these reveal central data for the project at hand (2.3). To begin with, though, I will present the intuitions in question as they have been reported in the literature (2.1), and briefly explain the theoretical role that intuitions in general play for a project such as mine (2.2). The critical discussion of intuitive PEP effects provided in this chapter will motivate my discussion of experimental PEP effects in the next chapter. It will also help me to introduce some important cases and distinctions.

2.1 Cases and intuitions

In this section, I’ll present intuitive PEP effects as they have been presented in the literature. The relevant intuitions differ along a variety of dimensions,