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A PUZZLE FOR PRAGMATISM

Robert J. Howell

Everyone, it seems, should agree that the importance of a proposition should play some role in the evaluation of an agent's belief in that proposition. There are three obvious ways in which it might do so.

1. The Pragmatist view: the importance of a proposition affects the standards of evidence for knowing the proposition.
2. The Saliency view: the importance of a proposition does not directly affect the standards of evidence for knowing the proposition, but the proposition's being saliently important does raise the standards of evidence for knowing it.
3. The Non-Epistemic view: the importance of a proposition does not affect standards of evidence for knowing the proposition, but it affects whether or not it is rational to gather more evidence.

This paper argues that the pragmatist view, perhaps the most intuitive of the three, fails because it either raises the standards for knowledge ascriptions too high, or it denies that knowledge is closed under known implication.¹ It is natural, then, to move to a saliency view. The saliency view fails, however, at least as an attempt to preserve the pragmatist intuition, since it only escapes the argument by abandoning one of the central

intuitions behind making pragmatics relevant to knowledge.

It is very tempting to believe that whether or not you know a particular proposition might depend upon how important the truth of that proposition is to you. One might think, for example, that Mark's hearing on the radio that the university has cancelled classes results in his knowing that fact. If, however, he happens to know that missing a class will result in his being fired, one might think that he ought to pursue further checks—by calling the university switchboard, etc.—and that unless he gathers this further evidence, he doesn't know.

The pragmatist view not only has initial intuitive appeal, but it appears to make headway against the everpresent epistemological skeptic. Making pragmatics relevant to epistemic concerns will thwart skepticism, while explaining its appeal: in important contexts we fail to know many things that we have enough justification to believe when the matter is less crucial. It turns out, however, that this view faces a dilemma: either the pragmatist must deny the closure of knowledge under known implication, or his view actually entails the skepticism it was designed to avoid. The latter option is obviously unwelcome, but most philosophers have come to believe that denying closure is just as infelicitous.² It

seems bizarre to deny that a perfectly reliable process, believed to be so by the subject, can fail to take a subject from something known to new knowledge. Thus, if the argument is correct, the pragmatist is in a bind.

The argument is this: many, if not all, unimportant propositions entail the falsity of propositions that are crucially important. For example, the proposition that Mark's brother is working hard today is of little importance to him. This entails the falsity, however, of the proposition that his brother is dead, the falsity of which is very important to him.³ It is so important, in fact, that it seems Mark should do whatever it takes to discover it is false. On the pragmatist view of justification it seems that the standard for knowledge that his brother is not dead is as high as you like. But then the following seems to be the case—either Mark does know that his brother is at work but does not know the more important fact, in which case knowledge is not closed under known implication, or the high standards of the important fact transfer to that of the less important fact, and he does not know that his brother is at work. That is, either closure fails, or the pragmatist's answer to the skeptic is lost.

This leaves two rather unattractive moves for the pragmatist. The first maintains that standards transfer the other way across implication—that is, the standards governing the less important proposition now govern the more important proposition. But this seems to conflict with the intuition that gets these views started—that the importance of a proposition raises the standards for justification. The pragmatist can get rid of this intuition, but only at the expense of universally lowering standards of justification and giving the view the implausible consequence that we can know very important things with rather flimsy evidence. The second unattractive move is to insist that the pragmatist's answer to the skeptic is not totally lost because there is no context of high enough importance that requires “Cartesian”

certainty. This is doubtful, but in any case the pragmatist gains no advantage from the fact that objects of belief vary in importance—it might just turn out that the high bar for beliefs is not so high after all.

It is tempting to think that the pragmatist can escape this problem by recourse to a strategy employed by contextualists.⁴ According to this strategy, closure always holds within a conversational context, and it only appears to fail when standards for justification are compared across contexts. The appearance of closure failure is thus a result of a sort of equivocation. This response is not to the point here, however, since all the contextual factors can be held constant and still the standards for justification will vary. The reason is that for the pragmatist the standards for justification are raised and lowered based upon facts about the propositions to be known, not based upon any features of a knowledge-ascriber's context.

The natural move to preserve some epistemic relevance for pragmatics, then, is to allow the importance of a proposition to affect the truth of knowledge ascriptions only insofar as the importance is salient. The salience view is worth considering in two different incarnations: contextualist and “invariantist.”⁵ According to a general contextualist view, of which there are numerous species, the relevant standards for the truth of a knowledge ascription are set by the propositions and conditions salient to the knowledge attributer.⁶ Thus, when the less important proposition is the only one salient to the attributer, the standards for knowledge are at the lower level. In that case, the subject knows both the unimportant proposition and the important entailed proposition.⁷ If the important entailment is salient to the attributer, the subject cannot be said to know either proposition since the standards for knowledge are raised. This view avoids the difficulty because the important entailments are simply not salient in normal contexts and they are therefore

properly ignored, and closure is preserved within a context as explained above.

There is also an invariantist view which consists of supplementing the pragmatic view with a salience condition.⁸ According to this view, standards for knowledge are set by the salience of the importance of the relevant facts to the *knower*. If a subject is aware of the important proposition entailed by the unimportant one, standards for both propositions are at the high level and the subject most likely knows neither. If the important entailment is not salient to the subject, she can know both since the standards are lower in that context.

Both of these views come with their own set of difficulties, but they both share a weakness, at least as attempts to preserve the initial pragmatist intuition. What fuels pragmatism is the intuition that standards of knowledge raise and lower with the actual importance of a proposition to a subject. Under any plausible analysis this seems clearly distinct from the intuition that standards of knowledge raise or lower according to whether or not the issues at hand *seem* important at the time. The pragmatist intuition is bound up with the idea that there is a type of epistemic negligence which involves ignorance of the stakes—whether it is believing something precipitously because one fails to recognize the importance of the proposition, or it is withholding assent to a proposition when contrary to the way they might seem, circumstances don't demand utter precision. Both of the salience views above seem to have trouble properly acknowledging this intuition precisely because importance has to be salient to either the subject or the attributer if it is to play a role.

The invariantist hybrid seems to have the most trouble with this situation, because it would seem to sanction certain epistemically negligent traits as virtuous. The world is littered with people bent on drinking their troubles away, and not a few of these people deem themselves the most knowledgeable of folks after a few knocks with the bottle. But,

their tone of conviction notwithstanding, they are wrong—forgetting one's cares only provides the façade of security, epistemic or otherwise. Drinking, it must be admitted, makes things seem less important. According to the invariantist hybrid, this is what matters epistemically: when the importance of a proposition becomes less salient to the subject, the operative standards lower. Thus, it appears that a little nip is just the thing, epistemically speaking—one can literally feel the knowledge increasing as one's cares disappear.

The invariantist's apparent permissiveness with regards to such practices that are intuitively epistemically infelicitous makes urgent the need to find another way to account for pragmatics in epistemic evaluations.

The standard contextualist view appears to be in a better position with respect to this "Cliff Claven" objection. The intuition that the carefree drinker is epistemically negligent comes, after all, from the perspective of a knowledge attributer for whom the importance of matters remains salient. Given that salience to the knowledge attributer is what raises and lowers standards for the contextualist, the Cliff Clavens of the world can be judged appropriately.

In the context of this puzzle, the contextualist's solution is not as attractive as it might seem, since it only moves us from the Cliff Claven objection to the "Norm Peterson" objection: the drinking Cliff is now knowledgeable because his attributer, Norm, is soused as well. Granted, the sober bartender—aware of the importance of the beliefs Cliff is forming—is in a position where he can truly say "Cliff doesn't know." But this does not cancel the counterintuitiveness of the fact that Norm can simultaneously truly say "Cliff knows" and that he is enabled to do so only by his own drinking. What's more, it seems incredibly counterintuitive that when Cliff sobers up and gravitas seeps in, it is correct for him to say "When I was drunk, it was true to say 'I know p,' but I didn't know p.'"9

These odd attributions are condoned by the contextualist view since it maintains that “knowledge” is an indexical. The dissonance effected by these attributions strongly suggests that the contextualist view is incorrect.¹⁰ Many of the arguments on this matter are well rehearsed, but from the point of view of the pragmatist intuition, it seems clear something is missing. The motivating sense was that if the stakes are high for whether or not *p*, then one ought to do more than normal in order to know that *p*. How much one ought to do in such cases doesn’t seem to be something that depends upon what is evident to observers, attributers, or other agents. It seems like a fact about the situation. Neither salience view satisfies this intuition.¹¹

What about the non-epistemic view? Against that view, a *tu quoque* argument seems in order. Doesn’t the non-epistemic view run into trouble with the closure argument as well? If “is important to *S*” is closed over implication it would seem that the existence of these important entailments would serve as a leveler for the effect of importance on the rationality of belief formation. Even worse, *this* closure argument seems to be merely an instance of a more general puzzle concerning rationality. Since evidence gathering is only an example of an act that can be more or less rational to perform depending on the importance of the goal, it would seem this argument should apply to the rationality of other actions. Suppose it is not rational to expend many resources in making it the case that *p* because it is unimportant to one whether or not *p*. Since *p* does entail the falsity of not *p* and some important *q*, by closure the importance of the latter action should make the former important, thus making it rational to expend resources in assuring that *p*, against the initial hypothesis. But surely this is a *reductio* to the initial argument against the pragmatist: clearly some goals are more rational to pursue than others

The problem with this *reductio* is that importance is not closed under implication. There are two varieties of closure failure—when an important proposition entails a less important one, and when an unimportant proposition entails an important one. Here are two examples of the former:

A: The world is ending tomorrow and Leslie’s shoes are tied entails Leslie’s shoes are tied.

B: There is a bomb on Leslie’s plane entails there is a bomb on her plane or her dog is sleeping.

The latter examples, where unimportant propositions entail important ones, are the propositions that generate the problem for pragmatism. For example:

C: Mark’s brother is thinking nice thoughts entails his brother exists.

Also, examples of the latter sort arise with necessary falsehoods. Where *F* is Fermat’s last theorem:

D: Not-*F* entails the world will explode tomorrow.

Since “importance to *S*” is not closed under implication, the *tu quoque* argument does not succeed against the non-epistemic view. The argument against the pragmatist still stands, however, since that argument does not appeal to the closure of importance, but only to the closure of knowledge. The pragmatist must either implausibly deny closure of knowledge under known implication, or violate the spirit of his project by universally raising standards for knowledge. While various forms of the salience view look to escape this consequence, they do so only by endorsing knowledge ascriptions that fly in the face of the initial pragmatic intuition. The prima facie plausibility of views that make the importance of a proposition relevant to whether or not it is known stems from misreading the data that support the non-epistemic view where standards for knowledge are constant but requirements for effort expended in belief formation are not.¹²

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NOTES

1. That this view is naturally intuitive is shown by the fact that a brief survey of both philosophers who do not specialize in epistemology and non-philosophers usually reveals many adherents to this view. Many epistemologists express sympathy with taking the importance of believed propositions into account in an analysis of justification, though the way these philosophers do so varies. See, for example, Nozick (1993), Owens (2000), Hookaway (1990), and Cohen (1999). More recently, Fantl and McGrath (2002) support such intuitions.
2. See, for example, DeRose's abominable conjunction in DeRose (1995).
3. Other examples are numerous. My brother's being at a certain latitude and longitude entails that he is not at the bottom of the sea. My chair's being blue entails that something exists, etc. There are also a series of entailments generated on the following formula: p will always entail the falsity of (not-p and q), where q is as important as we can imagine.
4. This is present in DeRose (1995), Stine (1976), and Cohen (1988).
5. This name for non-contextual views is borrowed from Peter Unger (2002).
6. Such views abound, but representatives can be found in Cohen 1988, DeRose 1992, DeRose 1995, Heller 1999, and Lewis 1996.
7. Assuming the entailment is known.
8. This view bears some resemblance to a position defended by Hawthorne 2004.
9. This problem is discussed in DeRose 1992. He attributes the initial concern to Palle Yourgrau (1983).
10. In this respect I follow Schiffer (1996).
11. Related criticisms of the contextualist view can be found in Feldman 1999, Sosa 2000: 1–24, Kornblith 2000, and Klein 2000.
12. I would like to thank Ernest Sosa, Matthew McGrath, Jeremy Fantl, Mark Heller, William Lycan, Doug Ehring, and Eric Barnes for helpful discussion of the arguments in this paper

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