

Knowledge and Practical Reasoning

A short comment on Jason Stanley's "Knowledge and Practical Interests"

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1 Introduction

In this brief comment on Jason Stanley's book "Knowledge and Practical Interests", I focus on "probabilistic strength of evidence IRI", as this is the most detailed attempt to make good on the main promise of the book: to explicate the role of practical (action-theoretic) interests in (propositional) knowledge ascriptions. While I agree with the overall argument of the book "to establish that knowledge is conceptually connected to practical interests" (p. 89), I am worried that the attempt to connect knowledge to practical interests is, as it stands, unaccomplished.

2 Definition of 'knows' in probabilistic IRI

Recall the definition of 'knows' on p. 89

Knows $(\langle x, w, t, p \rangle)$ iff

1. p is true at w
2. $\neg p$ 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 $\neg p$ 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 that basis of a competent inference from propositions that are known by x at t .

In this definition, IRI (and thus the main argument of the book concerning the connection between interests and knowledge) enters "via the notion of a serious practical question" (p. 91), so 'serious practical question' resp. the more general notion of a 'practical question' is the conceptual heart of all earlier attempts to make clear the connection between knowledge and practical interests. Consequently, it is the notion of a 'practical' question with the help of which the connection between knowledge and practical interests must be established

and errors in the definition of a 'practical question' will propagate to the overall attempt to connect knowledge and practical interests.

3 The connection between propositions and actions

The definition of the term 'practical question' on p. 92 introduces additional vocabulary - propositions and actions. Practical questions are then defined with respect to the connection between propositions and actions. Consider the following line of thought on p. 92 concerning the connection between propositions and actions (with added italic formatting).

- (1) "A subject's interests determine her goals."
- (2) "Given these goals, there will be a range of *actions*, which that subject ought practically to consider."
- (3) "Given that we are not ideal rational agents, there will be a range of *alternatives* that it will be legitimate to ignore."
- (4) "The rest of the alternatives to her *beliefs* are ones that she ought rationally to consider."
- (5) "A *proposition* is a serious practical question for an agent, if there are *alternatives* to that proposition which that subject ought rationally to consider in decision-making."

Perhaps I missed something, but as it stands, this line of thought has a covert problem in the definition of the connection between actions and propositions. This concerns the reference of 'alternatives' in (3). The only grammatical possibility via which the term 'alternatives' in (3) can refer back to (2) is that 'alternatives' denotes alternatives to the 'range of actions' introduced in (2). But (4) introduces the term 'rest of the alternatives' as alternatives to *beliefs* and not actions. This is a conceptual mistake, which disqualifies as a definition of the connection between propositions and actions. Probably what is intended here is that 'alternatives' in (3) refers to beliefs 'which that subject ought practically to consider' (2) and *not* actions. However, in this version of (2) the problem of defining the connection between propositions and actions remains unsolved, as this requires to spell out how actions relate to beliefs 'which that subject ought practically to consider', i.e. what it is to be considered in a subject's practical reasoning and that again leads to the question for the connection between actions and propositions. Other possibilities of adjusting the present account of the connection between propositions and actions are likewise problematic, such as specifying the type of alternatives in (3) as either beliefs or actions, as this just moves the problem to the definition of how alternative beliefs relate to actions or vice versa.

In the end, this open problem spreads to the definition of a 'practical question' in line (5) and, as 'practical question' is the conceptual core of the connection between knowledge and practical interests, also to the main argument of the book.

⇒ This is a possible question for discussion.

4 Intentions, Plans and Practical Reason

In any case, I think that the examples on p. 93 reveal a key to the connection between propositions and actions. This connection becomes obvious in the shift of the vocabulary which is employed in explaining what's going in the examples. For the establishment of the connection between propositions and actions we are no longer concerned with probabilities and decision theory but with planning and intention, i.e. with *practical reasoning*. Vocabulary of practical reason occurs on p. 93 as follows:

- (6) Propositions "...I need to take into account of in my plans..."
- (7) Propositions that "...have some effects on my plans"
- (8) Propositions that are no "...improvement over the plan of action I already intended to pursue..."

It is such statements about the role that *propositions* play in my *practical reasoning* that defines options of (re)action to be considered in my planning or not, and it is these statements that reveal the connection between propositions and actions: planning is the use of propositions in the rational control and intra/extrapersonal coordination of actions and their effects. As a plan entails the belief that its execution will bring about the plan's goal, the notion of a plan allows for an elegant account of the above problem concerning the connection between actions and propositions: propositions support and influence deliberation about possible options of actions given a goal, i.e. planning. The other way round, planning supports and influences propositions. Then, practical consideration of a proposition is the involvement of the respective proposition in the process of deliberation about plan-goal structures. And a proposition is a practical question if it occurs in the deliberation process and if there are alternatives to that proposition. The alternatives of a proposition involved in deliberation about a plan are shaped by the requirements of the respective plan. A plan requires the satisfaction of a certain set of propositions. Such sets of propositions usually include invocation conditions that must be satisfied for the triggering of a plan, context conditions that must be satisfied for the proper launching and execution of a plan and feedback conditions that specify beliefs about the result of the execution of a plan. For a given plan (and of course sets of plans), different (sets of) propositions are (to be made) available as input to the deliberation process. Amongst these different sets of propositions, an agent must choose and commit to one set which she considers a reliable basis for planning and which

is consistent with her existing intentions and propositions. And it is here that knowledge ascriptions come into play (here as opposed to belief ascriptions). If Hannah knows that she will be able to pay her bills on Saturday, this ascription is a more reliable input to her/my further reasoning (e.g. about her financial situation) as if Hannah only believes that she will be able to pay her bills on Saturday.

However, a further investigation of the connection between practical reason and knowledge has to face two major problems: (1) the connection between logical languages sufficiently rich to represent knowledge ascriptions (i.e. a logical language beyond propositional logic), planning *and* action and (2) the question whether all our knowledge is connected to practical concerns.

⇒ These are possible questions for discussion.

5 Knowledge and Intentions

The sketched account of propositional knowledge residing on intentions, plans and practical reasoning doesn't come for free. It withdraws both decision theory and interests a central role in the constitution of the connection between knowledge and practical reason.

For decision theory, the point is that in a quantitative, probabilistic, decision-theoretic (i.e. behaviouristic) account of knowledge, there is no place left for symbolic, propositional knowledge as it is required in planning. In decision theory, we calculate probabilities and then act upon the result - that's it. Consequently, I am critical that there's a chance to marry a suitable conception of non-quantitative propositional knowledge with decision theory.

For interests, with the employment of planning to set up the connection between propositions and action as choice of and commitment to options of action and required background knowledge, interests are no longer in the position of providing a reasonable conceptual framework. While interests are throughout the book assumed to be mutually consistent, coherent, rational and stable they do not need to be so. Consider the following example, where I have several conflicting interests (These are examples similar to those well known from the literature on intentions, e.g. Bratman's "Plans, Intentions and Practical Reason").

(9) I am interested in preserving my marriage.

(10) I know that I remain faithful.

Here, (10) seems to be true.

(11) I am interested in that good looking girl over there.

(12) I am interested in cheating on my wife.

(13) I know that I remain faithful.

Here, (13) seems to be false. Now consider the combination of these three interests.

(14) I am interested in preserving my marriage.

(15) I am interested in that good looking girl over there.

(16) I am interested in cheating on my wife with her.

(17) I know that I remain faithful.

Here, it is difficult to say whether (17) is true or false (The idea here is that intentions prevent such a case via consistency demands)? And how about substituting (16) with (18)?

(18) I am interested in cheating on my wife when she is on holidays next month.

Is (17) true until next month and then false? (The idea here is that intentions provide the possibility to account for future states of affairs via commitment, i.e. resistance against reconsideration.)

⇒ These are possible questions for discussion.