

Commentary on Pascal Engel's  
"Pragmatic Encroachment and Epistemic Value"  
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My commentary will focus on issues of pragmatic encroachment and epistemic value. The handout includes themes that Pascal's paper has inspired me to pursue.

(1) The fact that there is a pragmatic necessary condition on knowledge does not by itself tell us whether pragmatics encroaches on knowledge per se rather than on evidence or belief of some other proper part of knowledge.

(2) The pragmatic encroachers do not have a solution to the value problem. That is, the view that there is a pragmatic necessary condition on knowledge does not carry with it an account of the special value that knowledge enjoys over its proper parts.

(3) The fact that there is a pragmatic necessary condition on knowledge does nothing to undermine the so-called epistemic purisms of traditional analytic epistemology---such as evidentialism, reliabilism, relevant-alternatives, virtue theory and truth-tracking. Pascal concentrates on evidentialism (as will I), but the conclusions I think are generalizable.

Pragmatic encroachment, or the pragmatic constraint on knowledge (PCK), [appears on your handout]

(PCK) s knows that p only if s is rational to act as if p.

F and M offer a number of arguments in favor of this principle. One such argument is that it explains the important role played by knowledge-citations in defending and criticizing actions. For instance, defending my driving straight home rather than stopping at the grocery store to buy yams as instructed by my wife, I say, "But I know that we have yams at home". Or criticizing Lieberman's decision to stay in the race, a staffer says, "Come on Lieberman, you know you are going to lose. It's time to quit." According to F and M, the pragmatic constraint best explains the legitimacy of such knowledge-citations in this practice of licensing and sanctioning actions. Notice that it is here that we should find a connection with the value

problem. For if it is knowledge, and nothing less than knowledge, that figures in such action-guiding practices, then knowledge is more valuable than any of its proper parts.

An important question here is whether knowledge citations guide action because of the something distinctive about knowledge rather than something special about some component of knowledge. One possibility is that knowledge is constrained by practical concerns because evidence (or strength of epistemic position more generally) is so constrained. Notice that citing evidence, rather than knowledge, appears to do equally well at explaining the role of knowledge citations in defending and criticizing actions. Consider, “I drove straight home instead of stopping to buy yams because **I remember distinctly** that we already have yams”. And “the candidate should drop out of the race because **the polls show** he does not have a chance of winning”. Citing knowledge, rather than the evidence, works well too, but that may be because citing one’s knowledge implies that one is in possession of evidence or, more generally, is in some position of epistemic strength. So the fact that knowledge citations play an important role in guiding actions does not prove that it is knowledge, rather than something short of knowledge, that is more directly constrained by practical interests. For now, the point is this: there is some evidence that knowledge has a necessary pragmatic condition, but this may be the case solely because evidence (or some other proper part of knowledge) has the pragmatic condition. It is then far from clear that pragmatic encroachment is the key to value problem. That is, it far from clear that the value that knowledge is something over and above the value of any of its proper parts.

Let us turn to the issue about our intuitions in the famous trains, planes and bank cases. The intuitions are supposed to be that when stakes are high we know, but when stakes are low we don’t know.

Pascal does not share these intuitions. He says, “the fact that it is more important, practically or pragmatically or prudentially, to be justified does not mean that we are more or less justified depending upon the stakes. The fact that we say, loosely speaking that one is ‘not justified’ to believe that p when the stakes on believing that p affect importantly one’s preferences and the consequences of one’s actions does not imply that one is not justified *simpliciter*.”

Pascal is claiming here that the fact that in high stakes contexts we say things like ‘s is not justified’ does not entail that s is not justified. He suggests that we *speak loosely* when we say that the person is not justified (or does not know).

I’m not convinced that we are speaking loosely when we say that s knows or fails to know in the various stakes cases. Loose speech normally involves a situation where we are *close enough to the truth*. Clear cases of loose speech include my utterance that it’s 3:00 (when strictly speaking it is two minutes after) or my claim that France is hexagonal (when strictly speaking France is not a perfect hexagon). In clear cases, you might reply to my utterances by saying, “well it’s actually 2 minutes past 3” or “Well, strictly speaking France is not a hexagon.” And I might grant the point but conclude that *I was close enough*. Asserting that one knows or fails to know, however, is not like this. It would be exceedingly odd to say, “ok I admit that I don’t know that the bank is open but my knowledge attribution was close enough.” Or worse, if cases of high-stakes knowledge failure are the examples of loose speech, then we get the following awkwardness: You say, “... so, admit it. You don’t know the bank is open after all”, to which I reply: “Ok you got me. I admit that I don’t know the bank is open, but of course, strictly speaking, I do know that it’s open”. The “loosely speaking” criticism owes us an explanation of how it is that our intuitions about knowledge and justification in the stakes cases is a matter of loose speech, despite their disanalogy to clear cases of loose speech.

We should put this issue to one side, however, and grant the pragmatic encroacher the received intuitions, as Pascal ultimately does. For I think he is right that even if the intuitions are correct, the argument for epistemic purism and against evidentialism is not convincing.

F and M argue that (PCK) together with our intuitions about whether subjects know in high stakes versus low stakes contexts implies that epistemic purism is false. Purism is the view that whether one is in a position to know supervenes on the strength of one’s epistemic position. The strength of one’s epistemic position is said to be a matter of purely truth-related factors---such as the amount of evidence, the degree of reliability, or the strength of the relevant counterfactual condition. And so, any view that explains the difference between true belief and knowledge as solely a matter of such truth-related factors must be false.

The argument against purism appears on the handout. It goes like this. Suppose that possible subjects S1 and S2 are alike with respect to strength of epistemic position. For instance, we suppose that they share precisely the same evidence regarding a true proposition that p. And we suppose that S1 knows that p. S2 is just like S1 in every respect except that she differs with respect to stakes. The matter is much more important to S2, and so she is not rational to act as if p. But then by the pragmatic condition on knowledge, S2 fails to know p. And since, ex hypothesi, S1 does know p, it therefore follows that whether one is in a position to know does not supervene on strength of epistemic position. Epistemic purism is false.

Pascal is convinced that one problem with the argument is that it requires an incoherent description of the cases. The subject in case 1 is said to have the same evidence as the subject in case 2, while their preferences are different. Pascal finds this odd, since "preferences are determined by the amount of evidence that one has." Let's put the point this way. Why think that one can affect the rationality of acting as if p without affecting the evidence regarding p? Sure, if F and M are right that stakes affect knowledge, and if they are right in assuming that stakes don't affect evidence, then surely it follows that stakes effect knowledge without effecting evidence, and so evidentialism is false. But the view that stakes don't affect evidence is an assumption. F and M acknowledge this assumption in a footnote.

But why should we accept it? The F and M position reveals more fundamental assumptions. [They appear at the bottom of your handout.]

First, subjects S1 and S2 are thought to be the same with respect to position of epistemic strength because they are said to be evidential twins. One implicit fundamental assumption then is this: *only evidence effects position of epistemic strength*. Second, S1 and S2 are thought to be evidential twins, because it is thought that *practical interests do not effect how much evidence one has*.

The notion of evidence, for F and M, is meant to be "a broad intuitive concept, that internalists and externalists might analyze in different ways." And in defense of their position, they remark that "it ought to be common ground between theories of evidence that having a lot at stake in whether p

is true does not, by itself, provide evidence for or against p." Further, they explain that evidence for p, but not stakes in whether p, affect the probability of p (in some appropriate sense of 'probability').

My objection is this. Having a lot at stake does affect evidence. Consider, when stakes are high, evidence previously ignored becomes salient. Such "new" evidence may reduce the probability that p is true. For instance, S1 knows that the train is the Express train based on another traveler's testimony, but had it meant more to him to be right he might have recalled that a small number of travelers are clueless. Weighing in that a small number of travelers are clueless suddenly reduces the probability that the train is the Express. If practical interests can make salient previously ignored evidence, then Assumption 2 is false. Practical interests do affect the amount of evidence one has, and so, by Assumption 1, practical interests (at least indirectly) affect the strength of one's epistemic position.

But if these considerations are right, then there is an incoherence in the set up of the argument against purism. That is, it is wrong to suppose that practical interests do not affect evidence, and so, it is wrong to suppose that practical interests do not, even indirectly, effect the strength of one's epistemic position.

In conclusion, the fact that there is a pragmatic necessary condition on knowledge does not by itself tell us whether pragmatics encroaches on knowledge per se rather than on evidence or belief of some other proper part of knowledge. For this very reason pragmatic encroachers do not have a solution to the value problem. That is, the view that there is a pragmatic necessary condition on knowledge does not carry with it an account of the special value that knowledge enjoys over its proper parts. And finally, the fact that there is a pragmatic necessary condition on knowledge does nothing to undermine the so-called epistemic purisms of traditional analytic epistemology. The argument to the contrary assumes that practical interests do not affect strength of epistemic position. And as we have seen, there is some reason to think otherwise.