

Interest-Relative Invariantism

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In his important book *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, Jason Stanley advances a proposal about knowledge and the semantics of knowledge ascriptions which he calls *interest-relative invariantism*. A theory of knowledge ascriptions of the form ‘*A* knows that *S*’ is *invariantist* provided that, according to the theory, every sentence of the form expresses a complete proposition when a time is assigned to the temporal variable associated with the verb ‘knows’ and the semantic values of the substituends for ‘*A*’ and ‘that *S*’ are fixed. And a theory of propositional knowledge is *interest relative* just in case whether or not a person knows a proposition at a given time is determined in part by her practical interests at that time, where the more a proposition matters to her interests, the harder it is for her to know it. So characterized, IRI leaves plenty of room for IRI theorists to disagree among themselves about what IRI account of knowledge is correct. Stanley doesn’t commit to any particular IRI account. He does consider one account, but he does so merely “for the sake of explicitness” (88) and “just for purposes of illustration” (89), and he acknowledges that the account is neither complete nor correct. Why, then, does he think that some IRI theory is correct? There appear to be two reasons.

The first is that he believes that on balance IRI provides the best explanation of our intuitions about the five Stakes examples around which the argument of his book is structured, the balance taking into account problems with contextualism, which offers a competing explanation of those intuitions. More specifically, he claims that IRI correctly predicts our intuitions about his first four Stakes examples and that while it doesn’t predict our intuition about the fifth example, he can explain why we would have that intuition even on the assumption that IRI is the correct account of knowledge.

Stanley’s second reason for thinking that some IRI account is correct is, he says, that work by Jeremy Fantl and Mathew McGrath and by John Hawthorne shows that “it is immensely plausible to take knowledge to be constitutively connected to action, in the sense that

one should act only on what one knows" (9). We can see how the F-M-H line is supposed to motivate IRI by considering its application to Low Stakes and High Stakes. In Low Stakes our strongest intuition is that Hannah is justified in waiting until Saturday to deposit her check, and in High Stakes our strongest intuition is that it would be wrong for her to wait. If the F-M-H line is correct, the fact that in Low Stakes Hannah is justified in waiting to deposit her check on Saturday is explained by the fact that she knows that the bank will be open Saturday, and the fact that in High Stakes it would be wrong for her to wait until Saturday is explained by the fact that she doesn't know that the bank will be open Saturday. So, both the F-M-H line and IRI explain our intuitions about Low Stakes and High Stakes. But these are not competing explanations; rather, the direction of explanation is supposed to be that IRI explains why the subject in Low Stakes, but not the subject in High Stakes, knows, and then the F-M-H theory kicks in to explain why the subject in both examples is rational to act as she does, thus making the two theories mutually supporting.

I have doubts about both motivations, as well as other questions about IRI.

1. I think that the F-M-H thesis that one should act only on what one knows isn't plausible. The following sort of example is very common: you are completely justified in carrying an umbrella even though you don't know that it will rain but merely believe to degree 0.4 that it will rain. Not only is this a prima facie counterexample to IRI, insofar as it appears to be an example in which one is justified in acting as one does on the basis not of knowledge but of a justified partial belief, but there is a familiar and widely-accepted Bayesian account of why one's action is justified, even though one isn't acting on knowledge: one is performing that action which has the greatest expected desirability.

Stanley doesn't say what is wrong with the Bayesian account, but he does make clear that he would deny that partial belief examples are counterexamples to IRI. Like John Hawthorne in *Knowledge and Lotteries*, he says that in these cases one really is acting on knowledge: when it seems that, say, you're acting on your *believing to degree 0.4* that it will rain, you're really acting on your *knowledge* that there is a *chance* that it will rain.

I don't think this can be right. Suppose Jane believes to degree 0.4 that it will rain tonight. She might express her partial belief by saying something like, "It probably won't rain tonight, but there's some chance that it will." Although this would be an *expression* of her partial belief, it's not a *report* of it, for we can easily imagine someone objecting that the latest report from the weather bureau was that there was now no chance of rain tonight, and Jane can hardly reply that

what she said was nevertheless true, because she was merely reporting on her degree of belief at the time. At the same time, the probabilities are clearly epistemic, and, roughly speaking, Jane's probability statement will count as true just in case—very roughly (I'm concerned only to get across a rough idea)—the evidence available to her and to others like her in relevant respects warrants believing that it will rain to some non-negligible positive degree less than 0.5. If that's the right account of Jane's probability claim, then it's extremely puzzling why she should have to *know* that claim in order to be justified in acting on her partial belief by, say, carrying an umbrella. Surely, given her desires, her carrying an umbrella is justified if she's justified in believing to degree 0.4 that it will rain tonight, whether or not she *knows* that there's a non-negligible chance that it will. In fact, Jane may be justified in acting on a partial belief even if she lacks the concept of the relevant epistemic probability and doesn't even believe, let alone know, that there's a "non-negligible chance" that it will rain. Perhaps, however, the most telling objection to the F-M-H line is that requiring knowledge merely of the epistemic probabilities that warrant partial beliefs is such a retreat from the original idea and motivation behind the idea that "one should act only on what one knows" that it would seem to amount to nothing more than a so far unmotivated qualification of the Bayesian expected-desirability account.

2. Stanley's other motivation for accepting IRI is that the hypothesis that some IRI account is correct predicts our intuitions about his first four Stakes examples. But those intuitions are a lot more fragile than he makes out, and under certain embellishments of the examples IRI makes the wrong prediction. For example, Stanley makes much of the fact that IRI correctly predicts our intuition that in Low Stakes Hannah speaks correctly when she says "I know the bank will be open tomorrow;" but Jeremy Landen, an NYU undergraduate, points out that by altering the example slightly—but in a way that leaves Hannah's practical situation unchanged—we get the intuition that Hannah doesn't really know that the bank will be open:

Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit their paychecks. It is not important that they do so, as they have no impending bills. Realizing that it isn't very important that their paychecks are deposited right away, Hannah says, "Well, the bank should be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on a Saturday morning. So we can deposit our paychecks tomorrow morning." Sarah, however, is feeling pessimistic and somewhat contrary. She responds, "Well, banks are known to change their hours from time to time." To this Hannah responds, "I guess you're right. I don't *really* know that

the bank will be open tomorrow. Still, I'm confident enough that I don't have any reason to wait in this long line."¹

If IRI were correct, one should expect our intuition to be that Hannah speaks falsely in saying that she doesn't know. So why, in this case, do we have the intuition that she speaks truly in saying that she doesn't really know?

3. That Stanley's Low Stakes and Landen's Low Stakes engender opposite intuitions is puzzling. Let's momentarily put aside that puzzle to speculate about what might be going on in the following "smirk" examples.

A and *B* are leaving the mall for its multi-level parking structure. *B* is known to be absent-minded about where she parked in such situations.

A: "Do you know where your car is?"

B: "I do know; it's on level 4, section C—this time I actually remembered to write it down."

A: "How do you know your car wasn't stolen?"

B smirks.

A: "Do you know where you'll be next weekend?"

B: "I do know; I'll be at my brother's place in Vermont."

A: "How do you know that an accident or something won't prevent you from getting there, or that something won't force you to change your plans?"

B smirks.

A: "Do you know when Sheryl Crow is giving her free concert in Central Park?"

B: "Yes, it happens I do know; on June 5th. I don't have any interest in that sort of thing, but, lucky for you, I read about it in the *Times* this morning."

A: "How do you know the concert won't be rained out?"

¹ Landen (2005).

B smirks.

A: “My family and I are going to St. Barts for a week over the Christmas break. Why don’t you and your family come with us?”

B: “I know I couldn’t possibly afford such a vacation.”

A: “But didn’t I see you buy a ticket for the New Jersey State Lottery, whose jackpot, I understand, is now up to \$90 million.”

B: “Yeah; so what?”

A: “Well, how do you know that you won’t win the lottery?”

B smirks.

Here’s what I think is going on in the smirk examples. (i) *B* appropriately says ‘I know *p*’ and seems to be communicating a truth. (ii) *A* in effect points out that, if *B* knows *p*, then *B* also knows *q* (since *B* clearly knows that *p* entails *q*), but that *B* doesn’t know *q*, and therefore doesn’t know *p*. (iii) *B* accepts that she doesn’t know *q*, and thus doesn’t really know *p*. (iv) But her accepting that is neither correcting a false belief nor recognizing that while her previous utterance of ‘I know *p*’ was strictly and literally true, if she were now to utter the same sentence, she’d be saying something false. *B* smirks because *A*’s question is at best a bad joke, given that it’s mutually obvious between them that *A*’s question is inappropriate, and it’s inappropriate because the conversational issue was really about a question closely related to the one ostensibly asked, and what *B* implicitly meant to convey was the true proposition *p*’, which answers the question that was really, though implicitly, at issue. Roughly speaking, in the first example *B*’s intention was to communicate the true proposition that she *remembered* parking the car at level 4, section C; in the second example, *B* meant to convey the true proposition that she *intended* to be at her brother’s place in Vermont; in the third example, *B* meant to convey the true proposition that she knew that the *scheduled date* of the concert was June 5th; and in the final example, *B* meant to convey the true proposition that she was *quite certain* that she wouldn’t be able to afford a vacation on St. Barts—at least as certain as she was that she wouldn’t win the lottery.

If my interpretation of the smirk examples is on the right track, then it bears on IRI in at least the following three ways:

(a) It suggests a resolution of the puzzle as to why our intuition about Stanley’s version of Low Stakes seems to be the opposite of our

intuition about Landen's version of it. It suggests that what we're reacting to in Stanley's version is *not* the *true* proposition that, strictly speaking, Hannah knows that the bank will be open Saturday, but rather (roughly speaking) to our implicitly understanding her utterance as conveying the contextually relevant truth that her knowledge that the bank was open on a Saturday two weeks ago warrants their waiting until Saturday.

(b) The pattern displayed by smirk examples suggests another reason for thinking that our intuition about Low Stakes isn't to be explained by our sensitivity to low-stakes-inducing low evidential standards for knowledge. This is that some smirk examples should strike Stanley as *prima facie* high stakes-low standards counterexamples to IRI. Consider again the second of the two displayed examples, the dialogue that begins with *A*'s asking *B* if *B* knows where she will be next weekend. The situation might be high stakes for *B*; for example, it may be that *A* will need to call *B* to tell her whether or not she landed the big job. In the event, there are three things to notice about the example. First, given that you know that *B* plans on being at her brother's place in Vermont and has made all the necessary arrangements, and given that you're not aware of anything that is likely to prevent her getting there, your intuition that she spoke correctly in saying she knew she would be there will be indistinguishable from your intuition that Hannah spoke correctly in Stanley's Low Stakes. Second, although our intuition about *B*'s utterance is indistinguishable from our intuition about Hannah's in Low Stakes, Stanley evidently can't allow that *B* does know that she'll be at her brother's place in Vermont. For *B*'s situation is one of high stakes for her, yet she doesn't know by high evidential standards that she will be at her brother's place in Vermont. She doesn't know this by high standards because she doesn't *know* that she won't be prevented from reaching her destination in some way or other (perhaps by an accident on the known-to-be icy roads leading to her brother's place) or forced to change her plans (say, if her very old mother should become very ill). Third, when forced to admit that she doesn't know that, say, she won't have an incapacitating accident on the way to Vermont, *B* will acknowledge that she doesn't, and didn't, really know that she would be at her brother's place in Vermont. But, as the displayed examples implicitly show, this acknowledgement is forthcoming whether her situation is high stakes or low stakes, thus showing that the acceptability of her utterance of 'I know *p*' in the sorts of cases at issue is not to be explained by the evidential standards induced by her practical situation.

(c) Some smirk examples will also be cases that one might think are problematic for IRI in a way Stanley recognizes, but whose *prima facie*

problematic nature he attempts to explain away. Here is one such example. The proposition that Mavis is visiting her sister isn't a serious practical question for her husband Alvin. Let's suppose that its epistemic probability on Alvin's total evidence is great enough for him to know that Mavis is visiting her sister by the lower standards that, according to Stanley, low stakes makes sufficient for knowledge. At the same time, the proposition that Mavis wasn't killed in a car accident on the way to her sister's place *is* a serious practical question for Alvin, and by the lights of IRI, his evidence for that high stakes proposition isn't good enough for him to know it. Nevertheless, it's apt to seem that, *pace* IRI, he *is* in a position to know that high stakes proposition by the same low standards by which he knows that Mavis is visiting her sister. For, it would seem, he can simply reason "Mavis is visiting her sister, and that entails that she wasn't killed in an accident on the way to her sister's; so Mavis, thank god, wasn't killed in an accident."

As I said, Stanley is of course aware of this sort of problem, and he has this to say about it:

Suppose that p is not a serious practical question for x at t . But then, at t' , x infers a consequence q from p , and q is ... a serious practical question for x at t' . This may result in undermining x 's knowledge of p at t' . (94)

But how could one's low standards knowledge of a low stakes proposition be undermined by one's inferring a high stakes proposition from it? I suppose the idea is that a proposition that is low stakes will become high stakes when one infers a high stakes proposition from it. But if that is the idea, it's hard to see how Stanley can accept it. For, as his deployment of the example Ignorant High Stakes shows, he acknowledges that a proposition can be high stakes for x even though x isn't aware that it is. Given this, it shouldn't be x 's *inferring* a high stakes proposition from p which makes p high stakes; it should be p 's *entailing* a high stakes proposition, whether or not x knows it. But Stanley also can't accept that, for if every proposition that entails a high stakes proposition is itself high stakes, then there will be virtually no low stakes propositions. This is because virtually every proposition that isn't a serious practical question will entail propositions that are. For example, I know that my son is now playing soccer. That he's now playing soccer is not a serious practical question for me. But the proposition that he's now playing soccer entails that he's not now having an asthma attack, and that is a serious practical question for me.

Anyway, these are some of the reasons I'm inclined to doubt that any IRI account of knowledge is correct. If I had more space, I would

discuss the counter-intuitiveness of such apparent consequences of IRI as that, although Lester and Louise know the same evidence facts and the probability that Jones murdered Smith given those facts, Lester doesn't know that Jones murdered Smith, but Louise does, simply by virtue of her not caring who murdered Smith.²

References

- Hawthorne, J. (2004). *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford University Press).
- Landen, J. (2005). "Jason Stanley's Interest-Relative Invariantist Account of Knowledge" (unpublished seminar paper).

² The counter-intuitiveness of being able to acquire knowledge of a proposition just by coming to care less about its truth was pressed by Crispin Wright in a seminar he gave at NYU spring semester 2006, and in Hawthorne (2004) mentions that Timothy Williamson pointed out to him that in a version of IRI he, Hawthorne, entertains "makes for some intuitively odd counterfactuals" (p. 177, fn. 40).