



DISCUSSION NOTE

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On Treating Something as a Reason for Action*

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WHEN IS IT *EPISTEMICALLY* permissible to treat something as a reason for action in practical deliberation?¹ According to Hawthorne and Stanley (2008):

(KRP) When S's choice is *p*-dependent, it is permissible for S to treat the proposition that *p* as a reason for acting if and only if S knows that *p*.²

In the wake of Hawthorne and Stanley's article, epistemologists are lining up to argue that we ought to replace a knowledge-based account with some sort of justification-based account. According to Neta (forthcoming), we ought to reject KRP in favor of the weaker principle JBKRP:

(JBKRP) When S's choice is *p*-dependent, it is permissible for S to treat the proposition that *p* as a reason for acting if and only if S justifiably believes that she knows that *p*.³

It is tempting to dismiss KRP on the grounds that it demands too much and delivers the wrong verdicts in some Gettier cases.⁴ Here is Neta's version

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¹ Let's assume that the kind of permissibility at issue here is *epistemic* permissibility. If it is not epistemically permissible to treat *p* as a reason for action, there is an undefeated epistemic reason to refrain from treating *p* as a reason for action. If there is no such reason, treating *p* as a reason for action is permissible. I'd prefer to work from an intuitive idea of when it is permissible to treat *p* as a reason for action to working from some theory about what sorts of epistemic reasons bear on whether to treat *p* as a reason for action. The success of the arguments sketched here should not depend on any particularly controversial assumptions about epistemic permissibility but rather rest on observations that I suspect any acceptable account of epistemic permissibility will accommodate. In saying that the issue has primarily to do with epistemic permissibility, I am in no way suggesting that the epistemic permissibility of treating *p* as a reason for action has nothing at all to do with, say, the moral permissibility of acting in accordance with the judgment that *p* is true.

² A choice between options $x_1 \dots x_n$ is "*p*-dependent" if and only if the option most preferable of $x_1 \dots x_n$ conditional on the proposition *p* is not the same as the option most preferable of $x_1 \dots x_n$ conditional on the proposition that not-*p*.

³ Fantl and McGrath (forthcoming) defend the view that if your belief that *p* is justified, then *p* is "eligible" to justify you in Φ -ing and so can permissibly be treated as a reason for action. They use Gettier cases and cases of non-culpably mistaken beliefs to attack KRP. Gibbons (forthcoming) defends a similar view about the epistemic constraints on the permissible use of reasons for action. Their views are thus subject to the same counterexample that Neta's view is insofar as they classify the use of some non-culpably mistaken beliefs in practical deliberation as permissibly included in deliberation rather than excusably included.

⁴ Brown (2008), Neta (forthcoming) and Williamson (2005) attack the claim that knowledge of *p*'s truth is sufficient for permissibly treating *p* as a reason for action. Neta does not think

of the objection: Suppose that you justifiably believe that your partner loves you, and suppose further that you justifiably believe that you know that this is the case. Suppose further that aliens have replaced most of the humans in your area with indistinguishable, emotionless doppelgangers. Let us suppose that you know that if you are unloved, you are better off buying beer. You know also that if you are loved, you are better off buying your partner flowers. Thus, the choice whether to use the money in your pocket to buy beer or buy flowers depends on whether your partner loves you. It seems that it is not wrong for you to choose the flowers over the beer acting on the belief that your partner loves you even if you don't know that your partner loves you if the only reason you don't know is that you live in love façade country.⁵

It might seem that some sort of justification-based account must be true. It seems that justification is a deontological notion in the sense that you should never believe without justification and it is always permissible to believe p is the case if your belief that p is the case is justified. If you accept this while rejecting a justification account along the lines of JBKRP, you are committed to saying that situations can arise in which it is permissible to believe that p is the case but impermissible to include the belief that p is the case in deliberation even if you know that deliberation is concerned with some p -dependent choice. It is difficult to make sense of such a situation. Here, I shall argue that justification-based accounts are susceptible to a simple and damning objection that can be avoided only if pretty much everyone is wrong about what is involved in a belief's justification.⁶ If we say that it is possible for there to be false, justified beliefs, there is a wide range of cases that constitute counterexamples to JBKRP that do not threaten KRP. If, however, we say that there cannot be false, justified beliefs, the alleged counterexamples to KRP would be counterexamples to JBKRP. In short, unless pretty much everyone is badly mistaken about what is involved in a belief's justification, we cannot say that there is some general epistemic

that Brown's proposed counterexample is genuine, but offers one of his own. Neither Brown nor Williamson believes that there is some single epistemic condition that a belief might meet that ensures that the belief can permissibly figure in practical deliberation. In this paper, I don't take a stand on whether there is some single epistemic condition sufficient for permissibly relying on the belief that p in practical deliberation.

⁵ If Hawthorne and Stanley say that it's an excusable wrong, that still seems wrong as it seems there is nothing to excuse. It is worth noting that Gendler and Hawthorne (2005) argue that façade cases are not clear cases of justified, true belief without knowledge. It isn't clear what Hawthorne or Stanley make of this sort of objection because it isn't clear whether they will say you don't know that you are loved.

⁶ Is the truth of a belief necessary for that belief's proper inclusion in deliberation? It is if KRP is true. Hawthorne and Stanley (2008) do not argue directly for the truth condition, but the objection I raise against JBKRP is the beginnings of such an argument. If epistemic permissibility is closed under obvious known entailment, just as it is impermissible to treat the belief that you should Φ as a reason for action when you should not Φ , it is impermissible to treat non-normative beliefs known to entail that you should Φ as reasons for action when you should not Φ .

condition that a belief could meet that would ensure that it could permissibly figure in practical deliberation and say that this condition is justification.

Suppose you face a choice between two options, staying and going. If you go there will be trouble, but if you stay it will be double. So, suppose that you are obligated to go rather than stay. Let “*p*” be the proposition that you ought to stay rather than go. Because *p* is false, you cannot know that *p* is the case. Because you do not know that *p* is the case, according to KRP you should not treat *p* as a reason for action. Suppose it is possible to justifiably believe that you know *p* even if you do not know that *p*. (Imagine what you must in order to imagine that *p* is false but nevertheless justifiably believed.) Then, according to JBKRP, it is permissible to treat *p* as a reason for action in, say, pursuing means sufficient for bringing it about that you stay (e.g., sticking your foot in front of the closing door). But that’s absurd. How could it be permissible to treat the proposition *that you should stay* as a reason for acting when it is impermissible to stay?

If you think that the falsity of a belief does not prevent that belief from being justified when that belief concerns contingent matters in the external world, it would be *ad hoc* to say that the falsity of a belief does prevent that belief from being justified when that belief is about what should be done rather than simply about what is the case.⁷ This objection can be avoided if you deny that it is possible for there to be false, justified beliefs.⁸ So, if we were to say that the right to treat some proposition or fact as a reason for action is secured once you justifiably believe that the proposition or fact is the case and combine this with the knowledge account of justified belief, the resultant account is immune to the objection just raised. However, if any Gettier case constitutes a counterexample to KRP, the same case constitutes a counterexample to JBKRP if we say that justification is factive.

If you think that it is inconceivable that some sort of justified belief account along the lines of JBKRP could turn out to be false, it seems that you just might have to say that justification is factive. If justification is not factive, but justifiably believing that *p* is known suffices for permissibly

⁷ If you were to deny this, it seems that certain sorts of intuitively plausible closure principles would admit of far more counterexamples than intuitively plausible principles admit of. A subject might know various moral principles that have non-normative conditions of application while justifiably believing all manner of falsehoods about the non-normative application conditions that go into these principles and be unable to justifiably infer various things about the moral status of various courses of action being considered even if the subject came to these judgments by means of competent deduction from false non-normative assumptions and moral principles known to be true. Of course, one could try to deal with this objection by asserting that there cannot be genuine moral principles whose conditions of application we have justified but mistaken beliefs about and also insist that we cannot have justified but mistaken beliefs about which moral principles are genuine. I think this would be a desperate maneuver to save a theory, and I doubt it could succeed for reasons discussed in Sorensen (1995).

⁸ Sutton (2007) does this because he identifies justified beliefs with items of knowledge, but he does it for reasons other than those discussed here.

treating p as a reason for action, it should be possible for circumstances to arise in which it is permissible to believe p but not to include that belief in deliberation even though you know that the choice you face is p -dependent. The only alternative is to say that circumstances can arise in which it is permissible to deliberate from the belief that you ought to Φ even though it is impermissible to Φ . That possibility is difficult to make sense of. It suggests that the reasons that bear on whether to Φ are somehow different from the reasons that bear on whether to judge that you should Φ .⁹ If normative reasons demanded that we somehow act against our own judgment about what to do while keeping that judgment in place, it seems only the deeply irrational could manage to do everything that the reasons required. Reasons cannot be that unreasonable.

Maybe knowledge that p is the case is not necessary for permissibly treating p as a reason for action. It is tempting to say that some Gettier cases are counterexamples to KRP. The trend in the literature appears to be one in which people are rejecting the knowledge account in favor of some sort of justification-based account. This only works if everyone is wrong about what justification is. So, you cannot adopt anything like an orthodox account of justified belief and say that you are using this concept to shed some light on when it is permissible to treat something as a reason for action.

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⁹ In turn, it suggests that there cannot be wide-scope normative requirements of the sort that Broome (1999) describes that govern combinations of beliefs and intentions or actions.