

Action-First Attitudes

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In this thesis, I present an *action-first* theory of knowledge and belief. We have a mutual interest in the successful action of our peers, and the significance of belief and knowledge stems from their role in promoting this success. Knowledge states tend to guide successful action, in an appropriately systematic manner. Belief states systematically guide our *attempts* to achieve our goals, and *would* lead to success if all went well.

In defending the action-first account, I draw on a kind of *pragmatism*: we should look to the practical role of belief and knowledge attribution to determine the nature of belief and knowledge themselves. In chapter 1, I motivate and elaborate this pragmatist methodology. I start with the following challenge: empirical psychology presents a picture of our minds involving a vast range of representational states, and we need to locate belief and knowledge within this more detailed picture. Further, in doing so we must explain the *significance* of these states, at least if they are worthy of prolonged philosophical attention.

Traditional approaches, conceptual analysis and naturalism, do not offer appealing answers. The reason for this is that they ignore the fact that knowledge and belief attribution is incredibly *useful*. By focusing on this, pragmatism offers a promising alternative. In order to justify the claim that the practical role of attitude attribution can tell us about the attitudes themselves, I end chapter 1 by sketching a theory of reference that links the *meaning* of a term to its practical role.

The practical role of knowledge ascription is commonly held to involve identifying good informants, but this approach is too restrictive: in virtue of being in a cooperative society where the success of our peers is mutually beneficial, we have an interest in identifying successful agents in general, and provision of accurate testimony is only a small part of this. I argue in chapter 2 that the practical role of knowledge ascription is to identify and promote successful agents. This focus on action leads to a relatively broad conception of knowledge. In slogan form: all robustly true sufficiently sophisticated action-guiding states are knowledge.

The practical role of belief attribution is closely related to that of knowledge. As well as identifying successful agents, we have an interest in identifying cases in which agents are apt to fail, in order to plan for their failure, or correct them if possible. This leads to a view on which beliefs are action-guiding states that may not be success conducive – they are states that are apt to *become* knowledge given the appropriate evidence or argument. The ability for belief states to be influenced provides a link with rationality. The role of our ascriptions of rationality is to *promote* practices that tend to lead to knowledge. We criticize and praise the doxastic states of our peers through such ascriptions in order to improve their epistemic practices. This gives us a unified account of our concepts of knowledge, belief and rationality, founded in a cooperative society's interest in mutual success.

Granting the action-first account leads to significant consequences in epistemology and philosophy of mind, which I explore in the later chapters of the dissertation. In chapter 3, I look at the sense in which knowledge and belief must be *sophisticated* mental states, and argue that it must be liberal enough to apply to skilled action, thus motivating intellectualism with regard to know-how. Further, it gives us reason to reject various accessibility principles, since we are not committed to subjects being able to articulate what they know. These results are the opposite to those that follow from the testifier account of the practical role of knowledge attribution.

This broad conception of belief and knowledge, leads to many cases in which subjects possess a pair of beliefs with contradictory contents. In chapter 4, I look at how we should think about these cases, granting the pragmatist methodology. I argue that pragmatic considerations require us to view belief as a three-place relation indexed to the tasks such states guide, in order for our account of belief to capture their action-guiding role in a systematic manner. This task-indexed account offers a new way of thinking about certain Frege cases, as an alternative to traditional theories of modes of presentation. In particular, it suggests a new response to the knowledge argument – one that avoids the problems that come with 'phenomenal modes of presentation.'

Finally, in chapter 5, I look at what the pragmatist conception of rationality can tell us about Bayesian ideals in epistemology. I argue that we should view the Bayesian ideal as one epistemic ideal among many, rather than the complete story, and sketch an alternative 'resource management ideal' to use alongside it. This new picture allows us to resist Chalmers' argument

for the a priori, and preserve theoretically attractive level-bridging principles for higher-order evidence in the face of intuitive evidence against them.

These consequences, in turn, provide motivation for the action-account on pragmatic grounds: it opens up promising new lines of inquiry in philosophy.