

Review: *Knowledge in an Uncertain World* by Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath

David Lewis reminded us that fallibilism is 'mad', but the lesser of two evils when considering the infallibilist alternative (1996). *Knowledge in an Uncertain World* (KUW) tries to temper this madness by providing a systematic account of when knowledge can fall short of infallibility, one that allows pragmatic considerations to encroach into our epistemology. Fantl and McGrath's pragmatic fallibilism states that knowing that p is compatible with an epistemic probability of being wrong, provided it is 'idle', i.e. it does not change the extent to which one can employ the proposition in one's practical reasoning. As a consequence, contra 'purism,' subjects can be in the same sceptical epistemic position with respect to p , but differ in their positions to know that p .

After outlining fallibilism's traditional problems and ruling out contextualism as a viable alternative, the authors argue for the following principle:

(KJ) If you know that p , then p is warranted enough to justify you in ϕ -ing, for any ϕ ,

where 'warranted enough to justify' means that no epistemic weakness in one's position on p will prevent one from being justified. This is not to say that every known proposition automatically justifies: p may be warranted enough to justify q , and yet fail to be a justifier because other factors 'stand in the way' (for example, p may be irrelevant to q). The upshot is that knowing a proposition puts you in a strong enough position epistemically to employ it in any realm, practical or otherwise.

The authors then refine KJ by arguing that what does the real justificatory work is not knowledge per se, but knowledge-level justification. By 'subtracting' the various other components from a JTB+ model of knowledge, they argue that as long as knowledge-level justification is kept constant we are no less justified in ϕ -ing (this has the controversial consequence that falsehoods can justify). We are left with the following:

(JJ): If you are justified in believing that p , then p is warranted enough to justify you in ϕ -ing, for any ϕ .

As KJ entails that fallibilist purism about knowledge is false, similarly JJ entails that fallibilist purism about justified belief is false. On the basis of JJ, the authors propose a 'weakly' pragmatic element for belief, although the discussion here is not of central importance. They also pause to argue that accepting pragmatic fallibilism can explain the 'distinct importance' of knowledge, since a concept of knowledge is necessary to define knowledge-level justification. Finally, the authors compare the plausibility of infallibilism against the rejection of purism, arguing that certain counterintuitive consequences of impurism are shared by many other epistemological theories, and thus impurism is at least not alone in its imperfection.

Fantl and McGrath's systematic argument style makes their sometimes controversial views not only defensible, but almost natural, and on this account the book excels. Nevertheless, accepting the central principles presented in KUW may have

unintuitive consequences. KJ might seem too strong: it entails that the strongest epistemic position any action or belief requires to be justified is one entailed by knowledge. But it's not clear, for example, that knowing that p entails that p is warranted enough to justify my ignoring all evidence that suggests not- p : in order to be so justified I would require certainty, which is not entailed by fallible knowledge, and is thus a stronger epistemic position. Equally problematic is Jessica Brown's 'extreme bets' criticism (2008). Suppose one is asked to gamble on one's knowledge with an excessively negative outcome if incorrect, but only minimal benefits if correct. Brown argues that in such cases one keeps one's knowledge that p but fails to be justified in relying on p in the betting situation; thus, there is an action that requires a position stronger than one entailed by knowledge in order to be justified.

The authors address both criticisms at once: the knowledge that 'if p , then ignore all evidence against p /accept an extreme bet on p ' is 'junk', and its being 'junky' stands in the way of p being a justifier for ignoring evidence or taking bets. But this treatment feels incomplete: it seems, for example, that varying one's epistemic position with regards to p will make a difference as to whether one is justified in betting on p . So if we maintain knowledge of p in the above situations then knowledge does not provide a strong enough epistemic position to warrant ϕ -ing for every possible ϕ .

Another possible response to Brown's criticism is that in extreme bets one loses knowledge because high stakes undermine one's belief in p . John Hawthorne (2004) argues that a cost of pragmatic encroachment is that knowledge can 'come and go' as practical situations change (though for how long it goes is debatable), and Fantl and McGrath might accept this cost. But they are committed to something more: JJ entails that justification for believing is similarly transient. Thus, in extreme bet situations, we not only lose knowledge that p , but also justification for believing that p . But we cannot appeal to a loss of belief to explain the loss of justification for believing, and therefore are left with the stronger result that extreme bets on well-known propositions destroy our justification for believing them (if perhaps temporarily). While the transitivity of knowledge may be a biteable bullet, it seems less plausible when justification is concerned.

By allowing ϕ to be anything, the authors create a general principle connecting knowledge and the pragmatic, but with such a broad scope the principle seems to lose some of its usefulness. KUW continues in the spirit of the authors' previous collaborative work, but drops a condition present in their (2002), namely that the connection between knowledge and practical reasoning is valid only when the reasoning involved is reliant on the truth of the proposition in question. What KUW does not tell us (that the authors' previous work tried to) is what counts as a reason we should take into account in our practical deliberations. Without a more developed discussion of what can 'stand in the way' of propositions justifying ϕ -ing, Fantl and McGrath's responses to prominent criticisms feels incomplete.

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References

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