**The Case Against Purity**

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You know that you exist, that you are now conscious, and that you, and all the other human beings with whom you are acquainted, were born on the planet Earth. But, though you know all of these things, you will admit that some of them stand some chance of being wrong; you might very well think there is some very small chance that at least one of the human beings with whom you are acquainted was born on the space shuttle. (One indication that you think this is that, while you would be willing to bet your life that you exist, or that you are now conscious, you could not reasonably bet your life on the truth of the proposition that none of the human beings with whom you are acquainted was born on the space shuttle.) And yet, don’t you also think that there is some sense in which, if you know, then you *can’t* be wrong? It seems that there is a sense in which this conditional is true, but in what sense could it be true, and still compatible with our knowing things that stand some chance of being wrong?

The main aim of Fantl and McGrath’s recent book is to answer this question. At least to a first approximation, their answer is as follows: If you know that p, then the chance of your being wrong about p is *negligible for all your current practical purposes*. In other words, knowing that p involves being in a position to ignore, in all your current practical reasoning, any chance that p is not the case. It is in this sense that, when you know that p, you “can’t” be wrong – in other words, the possibility of your being wrong is negligible for all your current practical purposes.

This last thesis can seem very plausible. But it appears to have a consequence that Fantl and McGrath, like many others, find implausible; it implies the negation of the following very plausible thesis:

“(Purism about Knowledge) For any subject S1 and S2, if S1 and S2 are just alike in their strength of epistemic position with respect to p, then S1 and S2 are just alike in whether they are in a position to know that p.” (Fantl and McGrath 2009, 28)

To see how Fantl and McGrath’s thesis is inconsistent with Purism about Knowledge, and why such inconsistency with Purism should be counted as a cost of their view, we need first to understand how they are using the phrase “strength of epistemic position” in their formulation of Purism. They explain this phrase as denoting “your standings on exclusively truth-relevant dimensions like how strong your evidence for/against p is, how reliable are the belief-forming processes available to you which would produce a belief that p, how strong your counterfactual relations to the truth-value of p (how sensitive, how safe your available basis is for believing that p), etc.” (Fantl and McGrath 2009, 27). Fantl and McGrath do not give a comprehensive or precise account of what your “standings on exclusively truth-relevant dimensions” includes. But it’s clear enough from what they say that, whatever precisely might be included among such standings, the range of your current practical purposes is *not* included, and nor is anything that is completely determined by your current practical purposes. And it is this that makes Purism plausible, by Fantl and McGrath’s own admission, and so makes its denial implausible: Purism says that whether or not you’re in a position to know that p is determined by factors exclusive of your current practical purposes, and Fantl and McGrath are committed to denying this. They regard their denial as highly implausible, and so, they admit, they need an argument to support their denial.

Their argument relies on four substantive premises. Two of them are so plausible that they do not demand any defense. They are:

(KR - Theoretical) If you know that p, then, for any q, p is warranted enough to be a reason you have to believe that q.

(Practical purposes) p is warranted enough to justify you in ø-ing, for any ø, only if your practical purposes are such that it is rational for you to act as if p is true.

The third substantive premise that Fantl and McGrath employ is this:

(Unity Thesis) If, for any q, p is warranted enough to be a reason you have to believe that q, then, for any ø, p is warranted enough to be a reason you have to ø.

The Unity Thesis does not have the obvious plausibility of (KR – Theoretical) or (Practical Purposes), but Fantl and McGrath defend it by pointing out that, if it were not true, then there would be cases in which a proposition is warranted enough to be a reason you have to believe something, but not warranted enough to be a reason you have to do something. And yet, they observe, there do not seem to be any such cases. Furthermore, they claim, “when p becomes available as a basis for theoretical conclusions, it is ‘barmy’… to ignore p in one’s decision-making and planning.” (Fantl and McGrath 2009, 74) But why should this not sometimes be a perfectly reasonable thing to do, if there are cases in which p is warranted enough to be a reason you have to believe something, but not warranted enough to be a reason you have to do something?

Fantl and McGrath’s fourth substantive premise is this:

(Safe Reasons) If p is a reason you have to ø, then p is warranted enough to justify you in ø-ing, for any ø.

Of course there can be reasons to ø that fail, for any number of reasons, to justify you in ø-ing: the reasons might, for instance, be very uncompelling. But, according to Safe Reasons, when reasons fail to justify you in ø-ing, this cannot be because these reasons are insufficiently warranted to do so.

Combining the four substantive premises mentioned above, Fantl and McGrath argue for Impurism about Knowledge as follows:

(KR - Theoretical) If you know that p, then, for any q, p is warranted enough to be a reason you have to believe that q.

(Unity Thesis) If, for any q, p is warranted enough to be a reason you have to believe that q, then, for any ø, p is warranted enough to be a reason you have to ø.

(KR – Practical) If you know that p, then, for any ø, p is warranted enough to be a reason you have to ø. (from KR - Theoretical, Unity Thesis)

(Safe Reasons) If p is a reason you have to ø, then p is warranted enough to justify you in ø-ing, for any ø.

(KJ) If you know that p, for any p, then p is warranted enough to justify you in ø-ing, for any ø (from KR - Practical, Safe Reasons).

(Practical purposes) P is warranted enough to justify you in ø-ing, for any ø, only if your practical purposes are such that it is rational for you to act as if p is true.

(Conclusion) If you know that p, for any p, then your practical purposes are such that it is rational for you to act as if p is true. (from KJ, Practical purposes)

Each step of this argument is valid. And the conclusion of this argument, in conjunction with the Fallibilist claim that it is possible to know that p even when there is a chance that not-p, implies the conclusion that knowing that p places a restriction on your practical purposes: you cannot have any practical purposes that would make your expected loss on the chance that not-p high. To put it crudely: you know that p only if it wouldn’t be overly bad for you if the chance that not-p were actual. Given that your strength of epistemic position with respect to p is independent of how much is at stake for you in the truth of p, it follows that Purism about Knowledge is false.

Note, however, that the Impurism that Fantl and McGrath defend is a thesis about the relation between knowledge and interpersonal comparisons of strength of epistemic position. Why don’t they defend a stronger thesis that has been defended by others[[1]](#footnote--1), to the effect that, for a single individual, knowing p is harder the more is at stake for the individual in the truth of p? Fantl and McGrath explicitly consider this issue, and they note that the stronger Impurist thesis faces a problem that I’ve described before by means of the following example:

“Kate needs to get to Main Street by Noon: her life depends upon it. She is desperately searching for Main Street when she comes to an intersection and looks up at the perpendicular street sign that says ‘Main Street’. Now, it is a matter of complete indifference to Kate whether she is on State Street – nothing whatsoever depends upon it. So Kate does not care, and has not the slightest reason to care, whether she is on State Street; but she very much cares, and has great reason to care, whether she is on Main Street. She looks straight at the pair of street signs that say ‘State’ and ‘Main’. The ambient lighting is perfectly normal, and Kate’s eyesight is perfectly normal, and she sees both signs equally clearly. She has no special reason to believe that either street sign is inaccurate, though she also has no special reason to think either one of them any more likely to be accurate than any other street sign. There is nothing unusual about the circumstances.

…does Kate know that she is on State but not know that she is on Main?” (Neta 2007, quoted in Fantl and McGrath 2009, 201)

Fantl and McGrath admit that it is extremely implausible to say that Kate knows that she is on State but not that she is on Main. But they argue that their own version of Impurism is not committed to this implausible conjunction. In order to avoid commitment to the implausible conjunction, Fantl and McGrath consider a set of principles that would link the level of warrant required for one proposition to justify action with the level of warrant required for other propositions to justify action. Two such principles are these:

(Global Warrant Principle) If your epistemic position with respect to p is no stronger than your epistemic position with respect to q, then, for all ø, if q isn’t warranted enough to justify you in ø-ing, p isn’t warranted enough to justify you in ø-ing.

(Local Warrant Principle) If your epistemic position with respect to p is no stronger than your epistemic position with respect to q, and p is close enough to q, then, for all ø, if q is not warranted enough to justify you in ø-ing, then neither is p.

Fantl and McGrath don’t commit to accepting the stronger of the two principles above, but they do commit to accepting at least some version (involving some spelling out of the relation of “closeness” for propositions) of the weaker one. And it is by virtue of this commitment that they can avoid having to say that Kate knows that she is on State Street but not that she is on Main Street: the propositions that she is on State Street and that she is on Main Street are so related that her failure to know one of those propositions (or to be sufficiently warranted in that proposition for it to justify her acting on it) entails that she does not know the other. Thus, Fantl and McGrath avoid what they call “the Neta Problem”.

But the view that results from combining Impurism with the Local Warrant Principle involves the ad hoc maneuver of positing a “closeness” relation of some kind between propositions, and this posit is ad hoc because the *only* work that it does is to solve the problem that would otherwise arise for Impurism: a problem that concerns implausible conjunctions like “Kate knows that she’s on State but doesn’t know that she’s on Main”. Can Fantl and McGrath avoid this ad hoc maneuver without having to affirm such implausible conjunctions? They could avoid it by embracing the Global Warrant Principle instead of the Local Warrant Principle. But the Global Warrant Principle is ad hoc in a different way, and in a way to which Fantl and McGrath appear to be at least implicitly sensitive. They write:

“Intra-subjective purism, then, is predicted by the Global Warrant Principle and KJ – the very same KJ that figures so crucially (in conjunction with fallibilism) in the argument that purism generally is false. Why not go all the way, then? As long as we’re accepting intra-subjective purism, why not accept purism generally? Answer: because one of the principles that show us that intra-subjective purism is true is the very same principle (in conjunction with fallibilism) that shows us that purism is false.” (Fantl and McGrath 2009, 205)

In posing the question “why not accept purism generally?”, Fantl and McGrath seem to recognize that there is something ad hoc about accepting intra-subjective purism while not accepting purism quite generally. But they take the latter half of this ad hoc combination to be forced upon them by the argument stated above for Impurism. So what I’d like to do now, and in the remainder of this paper, is to show that the considerations that Fantl and McGrath offer in favor of Impurism can be at least as well accommodated by a particular variety of Purism.

What I have in mind is this: the Purist could accept a version of attributor contextualism according to which meta-linguistic analogues of KR-Theoretical, Practical Purposes, and Unity Thesis are all true. The meta-linguistic analogue of the Unity Thesis would claim that a reason for belief is warranted enough to be a reason for *any* action, but that last universal quantifier would be contextually restricted in some way. For instance, such a thesis could be spelled out as follows:

(Unity ThesisC) If, for any q, p is warranted enough to be a reason that S has to believe that q, then, for any ø that is relevant in a given context of attribution, p is warranted enough to be a reason S has to ø. (A sufficient condition for a value of ø to be relevant in a particular context of attribution is that S, the subject of the attribution, is thinking of ø-ing.)

Notice that the consideration that Fantl and McGrath offer in defense of Unity Thesis supports Unity ThesisC equally well: Unity ThesisC provides just as good an explanation as Unity Thesis does of why we do not segregate the reasons that we use in theoretical reasoning from those we use in practical reasoning. So dropping the former in favor of the latter is not in any way unresponsive to the considerations that Fantl and McGrath offer in favor of Unity Thesis.

What happens if we “contextualize” Fantl and McGrath’s argument in the way suggested? The new argument, adjusted so as to reflect this contextualist shift (and rendered with quotation marks used as corner quotes, and with insouciant quantification over propositions into corner-quote contexts), goes thus:

(KR - Theoretical) If “S knows that p” is true in a context of attribution, then, for any q, “p is warranted enough to be a reason S has to believe that q” is also true in that context.

(Unity ThesisC) If, for any q, “p is warranted enough to be a reason that S has to believe that q” is true in a context, then, for any ø that is relevant in that context, “p is warranted enough to be a reason S has to ø” is also true in that context.

(KR - PracticalC) If “S knows that p” is true in a context of attribution, then, for any ø that is relevant in that context, “p is warranted enough to be a reason that S has to ø” is also true in that context. (from KR - Theoretical, Unity ThesisC)

(Safe Reasons) If p is a reason that S has to ø, then p is warranted enough to justify S in ø-ing, for any ø.

(KJC) If “S knows that p” is true in a context, then, for any contextually relevant ø, “p is warranted enough to justify S in ø-ing” is also true in that context. (from KR - PracticalC, Safe Reasons)

(Practical purposes) “p is warranted enough to justify S in ø-ing” is true in a context only if S’s practical purposes are such that it is rational for S to act as if p is true.

(Conclusion) If “S knows that p” is true in a context, then S’s practical purposes are such that it is rational for S to act as if p is true. (from KJC, Practical purposes)

This Conclusion is fully consistent with Purism: it says only that a necessary condition of the truth of “S knows that p” in a context of attribution are that S’s practical purposes satisfy a certain condition. But this is consistent with the Purist claim that, for any subjects S1 and S2, if S1 and S2 are just alike in their strength of epistemic position with respect to p, then S1 and S2 are just alike in whether they are in a position to know that p. The Purist may explain the dependence of the truth conditions of “S knows that p” on S’s practical purposes by saying that S’s practical purposes constrain which values of ø are relevant in a context, and so constrain the range of things for which p needs to serve as a reason in a particular context in order for “S knows that p” to be true in that context. But all this is consistent with Purism.

Thus, attributor contextualism gives us a way to avoid commitment to Impurism, and to do so in a way that is consistent with all of the substantive premises of Fantl and McGrath’s main argument for Impurism, except for Unity Thesis. We replace Unity Thesis with Unity ThesisC, and the consideration that Fantl and McGrath offer in favor of Unity Thesis provides no reason to favor Unity Thesis over Unity ThesisC.

Of course, opponents of attributor contextualism will not accept the view that I’ve just described, but then Fantl and McGrath are careful to avoid commitment to denying attributor contextualism. They are simply interested in defending Impurism. For instance, in discussing Stewart Cohen’s Airport Cases, Fantl and McGrath say that “although we have taken no stand on the matter, perhaps DeRose is right that third-person cases [e.g., the Airport Cases] show that one shouldn’t be an invariantist – and so shouldn’t accept SSI or moderate invariantism. But that wouldn’t refute impurism. The impurist, too, can reach into the contextualist’s playbook to cope with these cases.” (Fantl and McGrath 2009, 55)

But, if we are leaving it open whether some version of contextualism is true, and in particular leaving it open to the Purist to accept the version of contextualism that I’ve just sketched, the Purist can then get all of the explanatory power of Fantl and McGrath’s view, without the intuitive cost of denying Purism.

But perhaps, even though Fantl and McGrath avoid commitment to denying contextualism, they are moved by what they call “the powerful linguistic arguments” that Jason Stanley has offered against contextualism, and so would want to resist the version of contextualism that I’ve just sketched. Now, I can’t go into the detail of Stanley’s arguments here, but I think I can say something brief and very general about them.

Stanley’s most widely discussed arguments against attributor contextualism all take the form of noting that the semantic context-sensitivity posited by the contextualist is without any clear precedent in natural language: therefore, the positing of such context-sensitivity is *ad hoc*. The contextualist might claim that the context-sensitivity of “know that p” is just like the context-sensitivity of, e.g., “sufficiently justified in the belief that p” or “sufficiently sensitive in believing that p” or some such complex expression, but Stanley can justly complain that the obvious context-sensitivity in those expressions is carried by the context-sensitivity of “sufficiently”, and so is unlike the context-sensitivity that is alleged to be present in the semantically unanalyzable verb phrase “know that p”.

I would like to point out, however, that Stanley’s own Interest Relative Invariantism itself posits a metaphysical feature of knowledge – interest-relativity – that is without any clear precedent in the metaphysics of propositional attitudes. Of course, there clearly are some attitudes that are interest-relative: e.g., the relation of *being rationally pleased that p*. But the interest-relativity of such analyzable attitudes is carried by the interest-relativity of *rationally*, and so is unlike the interest-relativity that is alleged to be present in the metaphysically unanalyzable relation of knowledge. If attributor contextualism is ad hoc, then so too, for the very same reason, is Interest Relative Invariantism.

1. For instance, Hawthorne 2004 and Stanley 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)