

PRACTICAL SENSITIVITY IN FOLK KNOWLEDGE ATTRIBUTION: GENERALIZED CONTEXTUALISM

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Abstract: Empirical studies in experimental epistemology show that folk knowledge attribution is influenced by practical factors such as morality, aesthetics, and interests. Through the iterative design of the Knobe cases, it is demonstrated that side-effect of an action can affect the result of knowledge attribution. Specifically, evaluators believe that epistemic agents know the consequences of harmful actions but not the consequences of beneficial actions. Even agents without justification and true belief or in Gettierized scenario, people still believe that S knows p. However, mainstream epistemologists maintain that whether an epistemic agent knows p is independent of the nature of the event, the content of belief, and their expectations. To reconcile the conflict between practical factors and intellectualism, this paper is further argued that the consideration of practical factors triggers the assessor's evaluative attitude towards proposition p, affecting the assessor's judgment on the strength of the agent's epistemic state, and thus indirectly affects the truth value of the knowledge attribution sentence.

Keywords: Knowledge attribution; Epistemic side-effect effect; Practical factors; Generalized contextualism

1 INTRODUCTION

“Know” is a word frequently used in everyday life. Asserting whether someone knows something is a common speech act. In epistemology, the assertion “S knows p” is referred to as knowledge attribution. Beebe holds that it plays a crucial role in people's daily lives, serving both to identify reliable information and to evaluate the behavior of the knower [1]. The influence of practical factors on folk knowledge attribution has been widely discussed in experimental epistemology. Beebe, Buckwalter, Jenson, Shea, and Turri [1-6], based on Knobe effect, extended his research to a variety of practical factors that affect knowledge attribution, finding that people are more likely to attribute knowledge to agents whose actions resulted in negative side-effects than to agents whose actions resulted in positive one. Specifically, when the consequences of actions violate moral, prudential, aesthetic, or social norms, people tend to believe that individuals are aware of these consequences. Conversely, when the consequences align with these principles, people tend to believe that the individuals are unaware of these consequences. This phenomenon has been verified in various experimental settings, including basic moral and non-moral scenarios, Gettierized scenarios, and scenarios without justification or even without justified true belief. This asymmetry challenges intellectualism that holds whether someone knows p is only related to truth-conducive factors.

This article, based on the original epistemic side-effect effect and the findings, explores how people make knowledge attribution in their epistemic practice, examining the tension between practical factors and mainstream epistemology in folk knowledge attribution. And it attempts to explain their validity from the perspective of generalized contextualism.

2 EPISTEMIC SIDE-EFFECT EFFECT

2.1 Basic Scenarios: Moral and Non-moral Situations

In the basic scenarios, the experimental design explores the manifestation of epistemic side-effect effect in both moral and non-moral situations through multiple cases. Beebe and Buckwalter found that moral valence leads to an asymmetry in knowledge attribution [2]. Specifically, when the consequences of behavior violate moral principles, people tend to believe that the epistemic agent is aware of these consequences; conversely, when the consequences follow moral principles, people tend to believe that the epistemic agent is unaware of these consequences. This phenomenon is not limited to the moral domain but has also been observed in non-moral scenarios. For example, Beebe and Jensen mentioned in the modified Knobe's vignettes [3], the vice president proposed a project that, while beneficial to profit, it could harm the environment. The president stated that he was indifferent to protect the environment and only care about profits. As a result, the project caused environmental pollution. This result of this experiment showed that participants were more likely to believe that the president was aware of the environmental pollution rather than protection. Specifically, when the consequences of behavior violate moral norms, the tendency for knowledge attribution is significantly increased. Similarly, in the modified movie studio case, the vice president proposed a policy that, while beneficial to profit, it could reduce the artistic quality of films. The president also stated that he was indifferent to artistic quality and only care about on profits. As a result, the project led to a decline in the artistic quality of the films. The result showed that participants were more likely to believe that the president was aware of the decline in artistic quality rather than improvement. This further confirms the robustness of epistemic side-effect effect in non-moral loaded domains.

2.2 The Gettierized Scenario: Challenge of the Contingency of Truth

The central focus of post-Gettier epistemology was to find out whether “justified true belief” are necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. In Gettierized scenarios, the experimental design introduces the element of apparent evidences to explore how epistemic side-effect effect manifests in such situations.

Beebe and Shea modified Knobe cases by adding conditions where the epistemic agent's beliefs are disrupted by lucky factors [4], yet the outcomes still align with the epistemic agent's belief. The experimental results show that this effect persists even when the agent gets to know *p* by luck. For example, in the Gettierized water source case, the vice president predicted that the project would pollute the water source, but the municipal intervened to improve the water quality. Despite the vice president's prediction being incorrect, the president still believed the project would pollute the water source. The experiment found that people were more likely to believe the president knew the water source would be polluted rather than being improved. This suggests that even when the agent's belief is disrupted by contingent factors, epistemic side-effect effect remains significant. Similarly, in the Gettierized German law case, the vice president predicted that the project would violate racial identity laws, but the government amended the law to ensure the project complied with these laws. Despite the incorrectness of vice president's prediction, the president still believed the project would violate racial identity laws.

The experiment found that participants were more likely to believe the president knew the project would violate racial identity laws rather than comply, which further confirms the stability of epistemic side-effect effect in Gettierized scenarios. Beebe once more found that when the non-philosophers, as putative knowers, are in a classic Gettierized situation, they still attribute knowledge based on apparent evidence[5].

2.3 The Disintegration of Knowledge Definition

In the scenarios of non-justified true belief, the experimental designer further explores the manifestation of epistemic side-effect effect in the absence of justification and true belief. Turri adapted the water source case with the condition of non-justified true belief [6], examining how epistemic side-effect effect behaves in such scenarios.

The experiment found that this effect persists even when there is a lack of justification and true belief. For instance, with no justified true belief, the vice president mistakenly believed the project would not pollute the water source, but the project ultimately did. The results showed that participants were more likely to believe the president knew the water source would be polluted, rather than improved. This suggests that epistemic side-effect effect remain significant even in the absence of justification and true belief. Conversely, in the water source case with no justified false belief, the vice president mistakenly believed the project would pollute the water source, but it did not. The results showed that participants were more likely to believe that the president did not know the water source would be polluted, rather than knew it. This further confirms the stability of epistemic side-effect effect in the scenario of non-justified true belief.

Through the triple validation of the Knobe effect cases, the results in experimental epistemology confirm the stability of epistemic side-effect effect under multiple conditions. In basic scenarios, it is evident in both moral and non-moral situations. In the Gettierized scenario, these effects remain significant even when truth is contingent. In the scenario of non-justified true belief, these effects persist even in the absence of justification and true beliefs. These findings suggest that evaluative factors have a profound impact on knowledge attribution, challenging the traditional epistemological view that justification and true belief are essential for knowledge.

There are several explanations on epistemic side-effect effects. Epistemological purists would most like to be in favor of distortion account that it represents performance error, not manifestation of conceptual competence, suggesting to eliminate the bias or performance error in knowledge attribution. From the point of pragmatic encroachment, practical factors get into the set of knowledge-determining conditions, affecting how to redefine knowledge. Beebe and Bulkwalter put it in a more generalized vision, holding that it is not about folk's knowledge concept, but rather normative assessment, revealing a further connection between knowledge and action. Whether agent knows *p* partly depends upon the goodness or badness of the actions considering the belief that *p*. However, it challenges the epistemological purist who holds that view whether a true belief counts as knowledge depends only upon epistemic factors.

3 THE CLASSICAL ORIGIN OF DEBATES ON PRACTICAL FACTORS

Since the beginning of this century, scholars have increasingly discussed how practical factors influence the attribution of knowledge. As mentioned earlier, factors such as risk, practical interests, and morality influence whether people attribute knowledge. According to this perspective, whether a person's belief can be counted as knowledge is not only based on factors like evidence, reliability of the belief formation mechanism but also partly due to practical considerations, such as the cost of error, epistemic intentions, and expectations. The debate over this anti-intellectualism has classical roots.

The concept that practical factors influence whether someone knows *p* has been discussed in modern epistemology. For instance, Clifford used the case of a shipwreck to illustrate that under normal circumstances, the captain's evidence would ensure that his belief becomes knowledge. However, due to life-threatening situations, people believe the captain does not know *p*[7]. According to Locke, when people have to weigh the risk of error, they need to meet higher

standards of knowing something. While according to Descartes, people's epistemic judgement is influenced by practical risks in daily life, but for the sake of pure epistemic inquiry, it is necessary to exclude practical factors that affect knowledge attribution.

Turri and Buckwalter argue that the contemporary debate on practical encroachment is a continuation of the Cartesian and Lockean views on knowledge [8]. They note that the debate over the relationship between knowledge and practical matters was initiated by Descartes and Locke several centuries ago. According to them, the Cartesian view posits that knowledge and practice are separated. Specifically, whether someone knows *p* is determined by truth, evidence, reliability, and other truth-conducive factors, while practical factors indirectly influence knowledge-determining condition. In contrast, the Lockean view maintains that knowledge and practice are interconnected. Locke believed that knowledge is essential for human survival that can guide activities in an ever-changing world. In Locke's epistemology, knowledge and practice are closely intertwined. Like truth-conducive factors, they are necessary conditions for knowledge. Both views assert that practical factors influence the attribution of knowledge, either directly or indirectly.

4 THE IMPACT OF PRACTICAL FACTORS ON KNOWLEDGE ATTRIBUTION

The above analysis highlights the emergence of a new paradigm in knowledge attribution. The epistemic side-effect effect provides empirical support for the involvement of practical factors in epistemology. Compared to traditional epistemic factors such as evidence and justification, non-intellectualism plays a significant role in knowledge attribution.

In recent years, research on experimental epistemology in China has found the similar results, showing that the knowledge concepts of the folk differ from those defined by mainstream epistemology. For instance, Cao Jianbo points out that the public tends to value the non-intellectual aspects of knowledge concepts and does not consider justified true belief as essential for knowledge concept [9]. Zheng Weiping further explores people's views on the relationship between knowledge and belief [10]. The findings suggest that folks do not always hold the view that knowledge entails belief. In specific situations, even if an individual is skeptical about a proposition, people may still believe that the agent knows *p*. This suggests that folk's understanding of knowledge may be more aligned with social conventions or practical rationality, rather than the traditional epistemological perspective.

According to the perspective of pragmatic encroachment, practical reasoning is a necessary condition for knowledge. For example, Fantl and McGrath [11], argue that an agent knows *p* only if *p* sufficiently justifies their actions. Hawthorne and Stanley assert that an agent knows *p* only if *p* serves as a justification for action [12]. They believe that the agent's practical considerations influence whether they know *p*. The attribution of knowledge depends not only on the truth but also on the risks or benefits, as the agent's assessment of the truth of proposition *p* influences their epistemic state, which indirectly affects whether they can know the proposition *p*. Beebe argues that epistemic side-effect effect reflect different understandings of the nature of knowledge, revealing another layer of the relationship between knowledge and practical reasoning: people's evaluations of the consequences of an agent's actions partially determine whether the agent's beliefs can be counted as knowledge [13]. Specifically, the asymmetry in epistemic side-effect effect cases, reveals the influence of multiple factors, such as morality, prudence, values, and aesthetics on knowledge attribution. The studies found that when the behavioral outcome is positive, attributors tend to believe that the decision-maker lacks relevant knowledge; Conversely, if the outcome is negative, attributors tend to believe that the decision-maker has relevant knowledge. This difference primarily depends on whether the behavioral outcome violates social norms or aesthetic standards. When these standards are violated, the public tends to have a negative evaluation of the outcome; otherwise, they tend to have a positive evaluation. The attitude towards evaluation is closely related to whether the epistemic agent's behavior should be blamed. It has been pointed out that blame plays a crucial role in the intention judgment of the Knobe case. If the outcome is negative, the epistemic agent should bear the blame and responsibility, leading to a higher attribution rate; if the outcome is positive, the epistemic agent does not need to bear responsibility, resulting in a lower attribution rate. However, in the paired cases of favorable and unfavorable conditions, the vice president's testimony remained consistent, indicating that the strength of agents' epistemic position was the same in both cases.

According to intellectualism, if two epistemic agents have the same adequate strength of epistemic state regarding the same true proposition, they should all know the proposition. However, the actual attribution results show inconsistency between the two, which suggests that the folk's evaluative attitude plays a decisive role in knowledge attribution. However, this view has been questioned by intellectualists.

5 INTELLECTUALIST REBUTTAL

Based on the experimental results, epistemic side-effect effect remains significant under both Gettierized conditions and the absence of justified true belief. This highlights the direct influence of epistemic evaluations on the truth value of knowledge attribution sentence. Specifically, people tend to judge whether someone knows *p* based on the outcomes of their actions. In this context, practical factors, together with justification and true belief, collectively form the essential attributes of knowledge. However, this argument may face the following challenges.

This argument challenges traditional intellectualism, represented by Reid [14], who argues that pragmatic encroachment neglects the nature of knowledge, and misunderstands the concept of practical rationality. If considering practical factors, it would confuse the relationship between practical reasons with knowledge. If the attribution of knowledge

depends on the attributor's evaluation of the consequences of actions, this would weaken truth-conducive conditions. Some scholars oppose the encroachment of practical elements into knowledge, pointing out that knowledge does not change due to interest or risk; instead, interests only affect the scope and detail of evidence or the level of knowledge standards. For example, in the epistemic side-effect effect cases, although both the president and the attributor had the vice president's testimony under favorable and unfavorable conditions, they were in the same epistemic position. However, the results of knowledge attribution differed, which shows that when determining whether someone's belief can be counted as knowledge, the attributor's evaluation of the consequences of actions affects the adequacy of testimony. Or knowledge standard is raised by the speaker's intention, or attributor's expectation, and so forth in the context of use. While, according to intellectualism, people determine whether someone knows something based on truth-conducive factors, not truth by chance, nor practical factors. Therefore, attributing knowledge to the epistemic agent based on whether the unfavorable impact of consequences violates social norms.

BonJour argued that practical factors can mislead epistemic evaluation in daily life[15]. He believes that while attributing knowledge based on practical considerations is appropriate, it does not guarantee the truth of the knowledge claim. Knowing is the most common factual propositional attitude. For Williamson, a propositional attitude is factual if and only if it is concerned with truth. When an attributor asserts that someone knows *p*, they are attributing a factual propositional attitude to the epistemic agent[16]. However, there is an epistemic gap between the epistemic agent's belief in *p* and the believing that *p* is true. Whether the epistemic agent's belief can be considered knowledge depends on whether they have sufficient evidence. In the Knobe-style cases, people judge whether the agent knows *p* by ignoring the strength of epistemic state regarding the truth of proposition *p* based on the consequences of the action. This situation misleads people into thinking that the knowledge claim could be either true or false.

Evaluative dependence undermines the foundation of knowledge objectivity [17]. For instance, in terms of value dependence and context sensitivity, the German law case, showed that the attribution rate of knowledge was increased, when the same behavior was categorized as execution which is morally neutral, or violation which is negative under the law. Moreover, the instability of evaluation standards is a significant issue, for moral and social values are historically and culturally relative. And if knowledge is tied to these values, its true value loses cross-contextual stability. Ultimately, the consensus on objectivity breaks down. When evaluation standards are diverse and divergent, it becomes difficult to reach a consensus on who knows what, and knowledge becomes a construct of specific value frameworks. The core risk is that knowledge may shift from being a carrier of objective truth to becoming relativistic in context.

In summary, for non-intellectualists, the attitude towards evaluating the consequences of actions partly determines whether someone knows *p*, which means knowledge attribution could be based on practical reasons rather than solely epistemic norm. This pragmatic encroachment fundamentally challenges traditional epistemology. Under the influence of practical factors, knowledge attribution involves the question of what an epistemic agent should or should not know about something. If knowledge is attributed to an epistemic agent because a belief significantly impacts their life or benefits people's lives, this attribution lacks the justification of epistemic truth factors. It not only undermines the necessity of truth but also exposes the inherent conflict between epistemic norms and practical norms [18], pushing knowledge towards relativism. In the folk's intuition, knowledge is no longer merely a justified true belief but is deeply embedded in social practice, driven by responsibility attribution. Future research should balance evaluative influence with epistemic normativity to prevent knowledge from becoming completely relativized.

6 GENERALIZED CONTEXTUALISM

In order to ease the tension between knowledge attribution and intellectualism under the influence of practical factors, this paper argues that the consideration of practical factors will trigger the assigner's positive or negative evaluative attitude towards the belief on proposition *p*, which will affect their judgment on the strength of the agent's epistemic position on it, and thus indirectly affect the truth value of the knowledge attribution sentence.

According to the generalized contextualism [19], knowledge attribution influenced by practical factors can be explained as the result of the interaction between the "Ac, Sc, p" triadic relationship, which includes the context of the attributor A, the context of the epistemic agent S, and the proposition *p*. It is argued that the triadic relationship influenced by practical factors is manifested in the following way: practical factors influence the attributor's attitude towards the proposition *p*, which in turn affects their judgment of the intensity of the agent's epistemic state regarding the proposition *p*, ultimately influencing their judgment on whether the agent's epistemic state meets the epistemic requirement of knowing. Moreover, contextual factors not only contain the agent's epistemic state regarding the proposition *p*, the attributor's attitude towards the proposition *p*, the attributor's expectations of the epistemic agent, and the salience relationship, but also include some other non-truth-related factors such as the interests, intentions, and purposes of the attributor and agent. Thus, in the context of evaluation, truth value-conducive epistemic factors play a decisive role in knowledge attribution, while practical considerations of non-truth value-related factors act as triggers, indirectly affecting the attributor's judgment on the strength of agent's epistemic state and intentions. Therefore, this proposition not only retains the decisive position of truth-conducive epistemic factors but also indicates the mechanism by which practical factors influence knowledge attribution.

In cases of epistemic side-effect effect, the contributors believe that the adverse consequences violate moral, value, and aesthetic norms, which triggers a positive epistemic evaluation attitude. The contributors consider whether an agent's epistemic position on the consequence is sufficient to meet the standard of knowing. While the adverse consequences violate social norms, increasing the risk of being blamed and triggering psychological anxiety. Therefore, people believe

that the agent has a high level of belief in the proposition *p*, leading to a high attribution rate. Conversely, when the consequences are favorable and follow social norms, the epistemic agent does not need to pay special attention to the relevant beliefs. And the risk of being blamed is not prominent, thus not triggering a positive evaluation attitude. In this circumstance, even if the agent has a strong epistemic state regarding the proposition *p*, the low sensitivity of belief leads to a low attribution rate.

Although epistemic side-effect effect reflects the influence of practical considerations on knowledge attribution, this does not conflict with intellectualism. According to generalized contextualism, knowledge attribution is the result of the combined effects of multiple contextual factors. This approach retains the decisive role of truth-conducive factors, while also emphasizing the “trigger” role of practical factors, which helps to reconcile the conflict between the encroachment of practical factors and intellectualism.

In social life, folk knowledge attribution aims to identify information that meets practical needs. Although epistemic reasoning is generally an epistemically normative activity, it is still practice-oriented, making epistemic rationality closely tied to practical rationality. As Fantl and MacGrath noted [20], to maintain the connection between knowledge and action, one must accept impurism in epistemology. Fang Hongqing suggests that knowledge standard is determined by community not an individual [21], for people need to communicate and share information with each other, which means knowledge bears some social attribute. However, humans have the capacity for reflection, aiming to form beliefs that are verified as true. Therefore, rational epistemic practice appeals to truth-conducive factors and value-laden factors as well. If the epistemic practice violates social norms, it will raise the knowledge standard, which requires more evidence to justify whether someone knows *p*. Moreover, in social life, knowledge aims to solve practical problems, but useful belief is not equivalent to true belief. Practical factors cannot ensure truth or transform practical belief into knowledge; yet they only help ensure reasonable practical activities. Therefore, whether knowledge is attributed still depends on truth-conducive elements. The way practical factors work in folk knowledge attribution is to affect people's willingness to attribute knowledge, which does not directly determine whether the knower truly knows *p*.

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