UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

Theoretical philosophy: The ethics of belief

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Philosophy International Curriculum

Fantl, McGrath and 'pragmatic encroachment'

- Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, 'Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification', *The Philosophical Review* , 111: 67-94, 2002.

- They attack evidentialism from an original point of view.
- They do not argue that practical reasons can have a direct influence on the justification of belief.
- Rather, they show how practical factors determine the degree of evidence required for a belief to be justified.

Fantl, McGrath and 'pragmatic encroachment'

- Evidentialism according to Fantl e McGrath:

- Evidentialism. For any two subjects S and S', necessarily, if S and S' have the same evidence for/against p, then S is justified in believing that p iff S' is, too.

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Fantl, McGrath and 'pragmatic encroachment'

- Evidentialism holds that the only factor that determines whether a belief is justified is the availability of sufficient evidence. Accordingly, two persons in possession of the same evidence must be equally justified/not justified regardless of the differences in the stakes in the practical context in which they find themselves.

- Fantl and McGrath attack this assumption. The stakes of the situation in which we find ourselves play a role in determining whether we are justified (epistemically) or not.

- The higher the stakes, the higher the level of evidence required for justification.

Fantl, McGrath and 'pragmatic encroachment'

- A different form of non-evidentialism:
- Foley argued that when we follow epistemic rationality, evidence is the only factor to be considered in determining what to believe. However, practical reasons may become relevant when we adopt the viewpoint of practical rationality or 'all things considered' rationality.
- Fantl and McGrath want to show that practical factors are also decisive for epistemic rationality. Without taking these factors into consideration, we cannot determine the required level of evidence.

Fantl, McGrath and 'pragmatic encroachment'

- 'Train Case 1. You're at Back Bay Station in Boston preparing to take the commuter rail to Providence. You're going to see friends. It will be a relaxing vacation. You've been in a rather boring conversation with a guy standing beside you. He, too, is going to visit friends in Providence. As the train rolls into the station, you continue the conversation by asking, "Does this train make all those little stops, in Foxboro, Attleboro, etc?" It doesn't matter much to you whether the train is the "Express" or not, though you'd mildly prefer it was. He answers, "Yeah, this one makes all those little stops. They told me when I bought the ticket." Nothing about him seems particularly untrustworthy. You believe what he says.' (67)

Fantl, McGrath and 'pragmatic encroachment'

- 'Train Case 2. You absolutely need to be in Foxboro, the sooner the better. Your career depends on it. You've got tickets for a south-bound train that leaves in two hours and gets into Foxboro in the nick of time. You overhear a conversation like that in Train Case 1 concerning the train that just rolled into the station and leaves in 15 minutes. You think, "That guy's information might be wrong. What's it to him whether the train stops in Foxboro? Maybe the ticket-seller misunderstood his question. Maybe he misunderstood the answer. Who knows when he bought the ticket? I don't want to be wrong about this. I'd better go check it out myself."'' (67-8)

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- 'If you know that p, then it shouldn't be a problem to act as if p. If it is a problem to act as if p, you can explain why by saying that you don't know that p. Suppose you are faced with some decision-do A or do B-where which of these is better depends on whether p. You know that if p, A is the thing to do, but that if not-p, B is. To say in one breath, "I know that p" and in the next breath, "But I'd better do B anyway, even though I know that A is the thing to do if p" seems incoherent. If you really know that p, and you know that if p, A is the thing to do, then it's hard to see how you could fail to know that A is the thing to do in fact. But then you ought to do A.' (72)

Fantl, McGrath and 'pragmatic encroachment'

1. S knows that p.
2. S knows that if p, then A is the best thing she can do.
3. Therefore, S is rational to do A.

Fantl, McGrath and 'pragmatic encroachment'

1. S knows that p only if, for any act A, if S knows that if p, then A is the best thing she can do, then S is rational to do A.
2. S knows that p only if, for any states of affairs A and B, if S knows that if p, then A is better for her than B, then S is rational to prefer A to B.
3. S knows that p only if, for any states of affairs A and B, if S is rational to prefer A to B, given p, then S is rational to prefer A to B, in fact.
4. S is justified in believing that p only if, for any states of affairs A and B, if S is rational to prefer A to B, given p, then S is rational to prefer A to B in fact.
5. S is justified in believing that p only if, for any states of affairs A and B, S is rational to prefer A to B, given p, iff S is rational to prefer A to B, in fact

Fantl, McGrath and 'pragmatic encroachment'

- (PC) S is justified in believing that p only if S is rational to prefer as if p.

- (PCA) S is justified in believing that p only if S is rational to act as if p.

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- What happens if we evaluate the train examples using PC:
- 'PC entails that you are justified in believing that the train will stop in Foxboro only if you are rational to prefer as if the train will stop in Foxboro. In Train Case 1, what you are rational to prefer, given that the train will stop in Foxboro, is boarding the train. You are rational to prefer this to inquiring, since the latter will involve some cost to you, and you don't much care if the train will stop in Foxboro. You are also rational to prefer this in fact, for the very same reason. …In Train Case 2, on the other hand, you are not rational to prefer as if p. For, in fact, you are not rational to prefer boarding the train to inquiring further.' (80)

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- PC makes it possible to highlight the relevance of pragmatic factors in the epistemic justification of belief, without claiming that practical reasons can directly justify a belief.

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Fantl, McGrath and 'pragmatic encroachment'

- 'Case of the Threat not to Believe. Suppose you are threatened not to believe that George W. Bush is president. If you continue believing it, you will suffer great pain.' (82)

- 'Intuitively, although you ought to try to get yourself to give up the belief that Bush is president, you are justified in believing it. Our account accommodates this intuition. What you are rational to prefer, given that Bush is president, is what you are rational to prefer in fact: you are rational to prefer not believing that Bush is president to believing he is.' (82)

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- 'Case of the Miserable Belief. It would be extremely hard for you to go on if you believed your son was guilty of the crime of which he is accused. The belief would result in intense misery and pain, whether or not he is in fact guilty. You have good evidence that he is guilty.' (82)
- 'Intuitively, you are not justified in thinking your son is innocent, since all the evidence is against it. Are you justified in thinking he is guilty? …Is what you are rational to prefer given that your son is guilty the same as what you are rational to prefer in fact? It seems so. Even given that your son is guilty, you are rational to prefer not believing he is guilty to believing he is guilty. And this is what you are rational to prefer in fact.' (82-3)

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- How can the evidentialist respond?
- She can claim that the level of evidence required for epistemic justification is constant by saying that the required level is always the level expected for cases with the highest stakes.

- '(EPC) S is justified in believing that p only if anyone with S's evidence for p, no matter what the stakes, would be rational to prefer as if p.' (84)

- Notice: EPC recognises that there is a pragmatic factor influencing epistemic justification.

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- 'EPC is too strong. It doesn't allow for many cases of justification based on induction, testimony, memory, rational intuition, and perhaps even direct perception. In many cases in which we are justified in believing a proposition p we would not be rational to prefer as if p, were the stakes radically higher.' (85)

- 'Similar examples can be constructed for your normally low-stakes justified beliefs such as: the local post office is open until noon on Saturdays, your cousin lives in San Diego, you have a Tuesday-Thursday schedule next semester, the Yankees won the World Series two years ago.' (85)

The examples

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The examples

- 'Bank Case A (Low Stakes). My wife and I are driving home on a Friday afternoon. We plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit our paychecks. But as we drive past the bank, we notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoons. Although we generally like to deposit our paychecks as soon as possible, it is not especially important in this case that they be deposited right away, so I suggest that we drive straight home and deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning. My wife says, "Maybe the bank won't be open tomorrow. Lots of banks are closed on Saturdays." I reply, "No, I know it'll be open. I was just there two weeks ago on Saturday. It's open until noon.'' (DeRose 1992)

The examples

- 'Bank Case B (High Stakes). My wife and I drive past the bank on a Friday afternoon, as in Case A, and notice the long lines. I again suggest that we deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning, explaining that I was at the bank on Saturday morning only two weeks ago and discovered that it was open until noon. But in this case, we have just written a very large and important check. If our paychecks are not deposited into our checking account before Monday morning, the important check we wrote will bounce, leaving us in a very bad situation. And, of course, the bank is not open on Sunday. My wife reminds me of these facts. She then says, "Banks do change their hours. Do you know the bank will be open tomorrow?" Remaining as confident as I was before that the bank will be open then, still, I reply, "Well, no. I'd better go in and make sure." (DeRose 1992)

The examples

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