

Hawthorne on knowledge and practical reasoning

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In a recent, widely discussed monograph (2004), John Hawthorne suggests a view of knowledge on which one's 'practical environment' makes a difference to what one knows. In brief:

Insofar as it is unacceptable – and not merely because the content of the belief is irrelevant to the issues at hand – to use a belief that p as a premise in practical reasoning on a certain occasion, the belief is not a piece of knowledge at that time. (2004: 176)

By way of illustration, Hawthorne invites us to imagine that you believe you'll be in Blackpool next year (2004: 176). (Suppose you believe this because you've been invited there, you plan to go, you have airline tickets, and so forth.) Meanwhile, you're offered life insurance. Clearly enough, you shouldn't reason thus:

I'll be in Blackpool next year.
So I won't die before then.
So I should wait until next year to buy life insurance.

On this occasion, it is unacceptable – and not because the content of your belief is irrelevant to the issues at hand – to use your belief that you'll be in Blackpool next year as a premiss in practical reasoning. So on Hawthorne's view, on this occasion, your belief is not knowledge.

The above piece of practical reasoning is manifestly bad. Why so? What's wrong with it exactly? If I've understood him properly, Hawthorne's preferred answer will involve the claim that there is a fundamental distinction between good and bad practical reasoning, one which does not admit of informative explanation in terms of more basic notions of epistemic probability and the like.¹ In some practical environments, your belief that you'll be in Blackpool next year can

¹ See especially 2004: 136–37, 178.

properly be taken for granted in practical reasoning, in others not; the distinction between the former and latter environments is sufficiently fundamental as to resist informative explanation in terms of prior notions of epistemic probability and the like. We can put the point as follows: in some practical environments, it is *practically rational* to deploy your belief that you'll be in Blackpool next summer as a premiss in practical reasoning, in others not – where the notion of practical rationality in play here is sufficiently fundamental as to resist informative explanation along Bayesian lines.

Hawthorne's view of knowledge can be restated in terms of this notion of practical rationality. As follows:

(H) If it would not be practically rational at t for S to deploy her belief that p as a premiss in practical reasoning, then S does not know that p at t .

The purpose of this brief note is to point out a counterintuitive consequence of (H). Suppose that Dr. Evil has implanted a chip in your brain that enables him to monitor your thoughts (but does nothing to impair cognitive function). He informs you that the next time you use your belief that $2+2=4$ as a premiss in practical reasoning, he will subject you to a painful death.

In this situation, one thinks, it would not be practically rational for you to deploy your belief that $2+2=4$ as a premiss in practical reasoning. In this practical environment, one thinks, you shouldn't make use of your belief that $2+2=4$ in practical reasoning. But then by (H), you don't know in this environment that $2+2=4$.

This is very counterintuitive. For surely you *do* know in this environment that $2+2=4$. Some chisholming is in order; I don't see right off how it should go.

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References

Hawthorne, J. 2004. *Knowledge and Lotteries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.