The Ignorance Norm & Paradoxical Assertions

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Aim of Talk

My Aim

Defend the rational compatibility of knowing & inquiring (further) against a prominent objection.

The Debate

The Question

Can you rationally inquire into things that you already know?

On my view, the answer is yes:

Compatibility Thesis (CT)

It is sometimes rational to know and inquire (further) into p at the same time.

The Incompatibility Thesis

However, many philosophers think the answer is *no*:

Incompatibility Thesis (IT)

It is never rational to know and inquire into p at the same time.

Proponents of Incompatibility

"If one knows the answer to some question at some time then one ought not to be investigating that question, or inquiring into it further or wondering about it, or curious about it, and so on, at that time" (Friedman 2017, 131).

Proponents of Incompatibility

"[C]ontinuing this inquiry [after achieving knowledge] is like continuing to eat after being nourished" (Whitcomb 2010, 640).

A Challenge for Compatibility: Paradoxical Assertions

Assertions like (1) are problematic:

(1) I know that the door is locked, but I wonder whether the door is locked.

These assertions seem to challenge the Compatibility Thesis.

Outline

Two Motivations

The Compatibility Thesis is motivated by two considerations:

1. Intuitive: Reflection on cases involving further inquiry
2. Plausible theoretical commitments

Intuitive Motivation

- **Scientists** can corroborate results they already know to hold
- **Mathematicians** double-check proofs that they know work
- **Students** double-check their exam answers

Cases in more detail

Lab: Scientists know that the genome sequence for COVID-19 is X, based on another lab's results. However, they re-run the sequencing to corroborate this.

Chemistry exam: Jorge knows that Beryllium is an Alkaline Earth Metal. During an open-book exam, he double-checks the textbook, just to be sure (cf. Beddor (ms)).

Surgeon: a surgeon double-checks that it's the right kidney, just to be sure (Brown 2008).

$\Rightarrow$ These all seem like plausible cases of knowing while inquiring further.

Theoretical Motivation

The Compatibility Thesis naturally follows from the following two claims:

1. **Knowledge is sub-maximal:** there are further epistemic goods beyond knowledge
2. **Inquiry aims at epistemic improvement**.

Going Beyond Knowledge

- **Acquiring new states:** Certainty; higher-order states; understanding
- **Improving one's state:** increased: confidence; credence; resilience/stability; sensitivity; justification

ANTI-SKEPTICISM: Knowledge is not a *maximally* strong epistemic state. We have a lot of it!

Inquiry and Epistemic Improvement

By inquiring, agents stand to epistemically improve:

- student becomes more confident or certain
- corroboration increases sensitivity to error
- mathematicians seek understanding why a proof works

Inquiry and Epistemic Improvement

Compare Friedman:

> *"[T]he point or purpose or aim of opening [a question] is... to improve our epistemic standing on some matter—to settle a question and to come to know" (Friedman 2017, 322).*

We ought not conflate epistemic improvement with coming to know.

Ways to Push Back

1. Deny that these agents *genuinely* inquire (versus *ersatz*)
   - **Response:** Seems *ad hoc*—esp. when these agents have clearly epistemic aims
2. Redescribe all the cases such that they are inquiring into a new question
   - **Response:** Not plausible for all cases

The Challenge from Paradoxical Assertions

Proponents of CT must explain the infelicity of (1)–(3):

(1) #I know that the door is locked, but I wonder whether the door is locked.

(2) #The stove is off, though I'm wondering whether the stove is off.

(3) #The stove is off, but is it off?

CT seems to lack the resources to explain why these are problematic.

The Ignorance Norm

Several authors argue that (1)–(3) motivate an ignorance norm (Friedman 2017; Sapir and van Elswyk forthcoming; Whitcomb 2017)

The Ignorance Norm for IA's (IGN)

If you know that p, you ought not have an interrogative attitude toward p (Friedman 2017, 311).

Interrogative attitudes = question-directed attitudes

Inquiry and Interrogative Attitudes

OK... so there's something wrong with knowing and having an interrogative attitude. What does that have to do with inquiry?!

Inquiry Requires Interrogative Attitudes (IRIA)

S is inquiring into p only if S has an interrogative attitude (IA) toward whether p.

Two Options

The proponent of CT has two options:

1. Deny that inquiry requires interrogative attitudes (IRIA)
2. Deny the Ignorance Norm (IGN) & offer an alternative explanation of the data

Two Options

Inquiry & Propositional Attitudes

Inquiry Requires Interrogative Attitudes (IRIA)

Inquiring $\rightarrow$ Interrogative Attitude

But not all inquiries require interrogative attitudes (cf. Falbo fc)

- *Further* inquiry

The language of *further* inquiry can embed propositions:

- Double-check *that*, verify *that*, corroborate *that*, confirm *that*

Counterdata

The following sound felicitous:

(4) I know that I bought all the ingredients, but I'm double-checking, just to be sure.

(5) Although he knows he turned the stove off, he's double-checking, just to be certain.

(6) Although we know that the vaccine is 90% effective, we're corroborating that it is to increase our sensitivity to error.

If the Incompatibility Thesis is correct, then (4)–(6) should be either infelicitous or systemically false.

Undermining the Motivations for IRIA

Cases of further inquiry suggest that many of the initial motivations for IRIA don't apply:

1. Motivation 1: Inquiry seems question-directed
   - Verbs like 'double-check' embed well with propositions.
2. Motivation 2: Inquiry is compatible with radical ignorance
   - When one inquires further, one is not radically ignorant.
3. Motivation 3: Inquiry requires openness
   - One can believe p and be open about whether p.

The Virtues of Option 1

1. Circumvents challenge by denying a premise that gives rise to it
2. Allows us to accept IGN as the best explanation of the data
3. Compatible with a weaker version (some vs. all)

If forced to choose, I would choose Option 1.

Rejecting the Ignorance Norm

The Ignorance Norm for IA's (IGN)

If you know that p, you ought not have an interrogative attitude toward p.

IGN offers an apparently plausible explanation of the data.

But are there alternative explanations?

An Alternative Explanation

- When one asserts that p, one proposes to treat p as settled & to add it to the common ground.
- There is then something odd about questioning whether p.
- In (1)–(3), S proposes to treat p as settled and as unsettled.

The Settling Norm

Don't propose to treat p as settled and as unsettled.

Norm about *conversational moves*.

Independent Motivation

Falls out of a broadly Stalnakerian understanding of assertion:

- When S asserts that p, she tries to eliminate situations incompatible with p.

Correspondence

It is unacceptable, *ceteris paribus*, for a speaker to non-rhetorically ask, "Is it the case that p?" when p is already part of the common ground (Kirk-Giannini 2018).

Knowing vs. Settling

Knowing and settling come apart in both directions:

1. *Knowing without settling:* not realizing you know
2. *Settling without knowing:* e.g. supposition

Advantages of My Explanation

Avoids apparent counterexamples to IGN (Archer 2018):

1. Wondering because you fail to realize you know
2. Wondering because p is not cognitively available

A Methodological Confession

It's unclear how probative linguistic data like (1)–(3) are for our normative epistemological theorizing:

1. Counterdata in §3
2. Intuitions are not always clear
3. Linguistic data can lead us astray:
   - #I know that p, but I don't know that p for sure.
   - #I know that p, but it's possible on my evidence that $\neg p$.

Upshot

Upshot: We ought not regard linguistic data with undue deference when we have reason to think it'll lead us astray!

Recap

- The Compatibility Thesis seems plausible, but it faces a formidable challenge.
- We saw two ways out from that challenge:
  - (i) Deny that inquiry requires IA's
  - (ii) Reject the Ignorance Norm
- Even if we know these work, we can fruitfully inquire further:
  - (i) Nature of *propositional* inquiring attitudes (cf. Falbo (forthcoming))
  - (ii) Pragmatics of interrogative attitude attributions

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