

# Knowledge and Reasonableness

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**Abstract:** The notion of relevance plays a role in many accounts of knowledge and knowledge ascription. Although use of the notion is well-motivated, theorists struggle to codify relevance. A reasonable person standard of relevance addresses this codification problem, and provides an objective and flexible standard of relevance; however, treating relevance as reasonableness seems to allow practical factors to determine whether one has knowledge or not—so-called “pragmatic encroachment.” I argue that a fuller understanding of reasonableness and of the role of practical factors in the acquisition of knowledge lets us avoid pragmatic encroachment.

## 1. The problem of relevance

Much of what we take ourselves to know is based on less than conclusive evidence. We know the global climate is growing warmer, based on evidence of rising sea levels and diminishing snowpack; we also know why this is happening, based on evidence such as ice samples showing a historical correlation between temperature and greenhouse gases. Our evidence isn't infallible—in a different possible world, someone in our total evidential state could be wrong about the cause of global warming; an undetected and surprising source of heat energy is (let's suppose) possible, however implausible or outlandish such a possibility is. But mere metaphysical possibilities can be ignored—they don't prevent our knowing that increased greenhouse gases are the cause of global warming. Like a lot of our empirical knowledge this knowledge is based on fallible, but entirely compelling evidence.

How much evidence is enough? On an absolute standard requiring evidence against every counter-possibility no matter how outlandish, we know next to nothing. Alternatively, a less than absolute standard can be set at an arbitrary threshold, as is done in science: for instance in the search for the Higgs boson, researchers were very certain they had found tell tale marks, but kept going with data analysis until the probability was vanishingly small (“5-sigmas” or a 1 in 3, 500,000 chance) that no boson was responsible for their observations. Neither an absolutely demanding nor an arbitrary standard seems the right one for ordinary claims to know. If you tell me you know the box score from last night's game, I'm not expecting you to have

reached an arbitrary probabilistic standard, and I'm not expecting you to have evidence against all counter-possibilities no matter how fantastic.

One way to articulate a fallibilist epistemology is a Relevant Alternatives approach.<sup>1</sup> On this approach knowing an empirical proposition  $P$  requires one's evidence be sufficient to eliminate only relevant alternatives to  $P$  (where alternatives to  $P$  are possibilities or propositions that defeat one's case for  $P$ ). Fantastic possibilities are irrelevant, and there is no need to gather evidence against them.

Well and good, but what makes an alternative relevant? Relevant Alternatives theorists struggle with this question.<sup>2</sup> Fred Dretske, one of the first defenders of the Relevant Alternatives approach, suggests a counterfactual criterion: the alternatives irrelevant for knowing  $P$  are those that don't occur in the nearest possible world(s) where  $P$  is false.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the suggested counterfactual test makes some unexpected alternatives relevant.<sup>4</sup> As far as I know, every such suggestion has its counter-examples. The history of attempts and failures to state a criterion of relevance makes it is easy to feel that while relevance theory is attractive, stating a criterion for relevance is a hopeless task.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Austin, "Other Minds"; Dretske, "Epistemic Operators"; Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge"; Rysiew, "Motivating the Relevant Alternatives Approach."

<sup>2</sup> DeRose, "Relevant Alternatives and the Content of Knowledge Attribution"; *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism and Context*.

<sup>3</sup> Or, any  $P$ -precluding alternative is relevant so long as it holds in the nearest world where  $P$  does not. Dretske, "The Case against Closure." For Dretske, nearness is determined by facts about one's physical environment; for David Lewis, nearness is a context-dependent metric of similarity among worlds, so nearness of worlds is not fixed once and for all by one's physical environment.

<sup>4</sup> For example (Hiller and Neta, "Safety and Epistemic Luck."): You check your bank statement online, and it says you have some cash left in your account. Unbeknownst to you, a clever identity thief has been scheming to empty your bank account, but he has just won the lottery and so drops his plans. Your accounts are untouched. When you check your account online, it seems you know your account has cash in it. Not so on the proposed counterfactual test. In the nearest world where your account doesn't have cash, that's because the bank robber didn't win the lottery (a very close world), so this alternative is relevant, and so on the proposed account of relevance you need evidence to eliminate it if you're to know your account has cash. But it is odd to count this possibility of a clever electronic robbery as relevant, something you need to rule out if you're to know your account balance. Perhaps probability could serve as a criterion of relevance, and only those alternatives that are highly probable (in some chosen sense of probability), count as relevant? Again a problem—we can find highly improbable defeaters sometimes worth worrying about. The chance that I hold the winning ticket in a fair lottery may be vanishingly small, yet this alternative seems to be the one that prevents me from knowing that I will lose the fair lottery. Further counterexamples confront other approaches to codifying relevance.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Sosa remarks:

What makes an alternative irrelevant? No answer is generally accepted, even among relevantists, and the notion of relevance remains obscure, no published account having yet much relieved this darkness. (I do not expect relevance theorists to disagree radically with this estimate; one thinker's debilitating drawback is another's challenging open problem, to be resolved in due course.) Sosa, "How to Defeat Opposition to Moore," 142.

So much the worse for Relevant Alternatives theory, one might say. But it isn't only theories that overtly bill themselves "Relevant Alternatives Theories" that face the problem of relevance. Modal theories that would seem to escape the problem by characterizing knowledge in modal metaphysical terms (e.g. reliabilism, safety theory, sensitivity theory) are implicitly offering accounts of which worlds are relevant. These theories also run into problems with counter-examples, where metaphysical facts make the subject's belief that *P* unsafe or insensitive or what have you, and yet we would judge the subject to know *P*. The problem of relevance trips them up, too. Moreover, Invariantist theories that would seem to escape the problem by requiring a fixed standard of evidence face a parallel problem: such theories are only plausible to the extent that conversational pragmatics can account for the warranted assertability of ordinary knowledge claims, and such pragmatic accounts naturally appeal to relevance.<sup>6</sup> Most every plausible account of knowledge faces the problem of relevance one way or another.

In this paper, I first suggest why the problem of relevance is so difficult. Once we have a diagnosis, we'll better see our way to a solution. I will argue that the solution is to think of relevance in terms of reasonableness: a relevant alternative to *P* is an alternative a reasonable person would be concerned to eliminate on the way to knowing *P*.<sup>7</sup> If we give reasonableness a central place in an account of knowledge we invite an apparently practical notion into the heart of epistemology, and this appearance raises concerns. In response I'll argue that the appearance is misleading—once we see the role of reasonableness in knowledge acquisition, we'll better understand how knowledge is a purely epistemic relation.

## 2. Diagnosing the problem of relevance

What is relevant is not codifiable in a detailed rule stateable in advance of encountering the cases covered by it. Attempts to state a standard of relevance have attempted this codification and failed. A diagnosis of the problem should tell us why this difficulty of codification arises.

In a different context, famous legal theorist H.L. Hart observes that the law encounters difficulty in formulating rules to govern our conduct. Hart gives us an example: we aim to keep things peaceful in the park, and so we legislate no vehicles in the park. Now a new circumstance arises we hadn't anticipated—does a skateboard count as a vehicle?

“... until we have put the general aim of peace in the park into connection with those cases which we did not, or perhaps could not, initially envisage... our aim is, in this direction indeterminate. We have not settled, because we have not anticipated, the question which will be raised by the

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<sup>6</sup> Rysiew, “The Context-Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions.”

<sup>7</sup> I also explore the reasonable person standard of relevance in *Assurance: An Austinian View of Knowledge and Knowledge Claims*.

unenvisioned case when it occurs: whether some degree of peace in the park is to be sacrificed to, or defended against, those children whose pleasure or interest it is to use these things.”<sup>8</sup>

Our general aim (peace in the park) does not settle how we aim to behave in specific unenvisioned situations (will we forbid skateboards?). Our specific aim can only be settled when we have a fresh chance to consider how our interests and aims fare together in the particular situation at hand. Because of this fact,

“...we should not cherish, even as an ideal, the conception of a rule so detailed that the question whether it applied or not to a particular case was always settled in advance, and never involved, at the point of actual application, a fresh choice between open alternatives.”<sup>9</sup>

Hart here makes a deep observation about human aims. Our desires or interests alone cannot completely determine our specific aims in the specific forms they take in specific situations of our lives. Over and above the indeterminacy or “open texture” of language, the fact of our necessarily incomplete knowledge of our aims means that we cannot articulate a rule that ensures our specific aims will be satisfied particular situations.

Hart’s observation holds true about our epistemic lives as well as our practical lives. In our epistemic lives we also have general aims, and incomplete knowledge of what the satisfaction of these general aims requires in particular situations. As inquirers we have general aims to acquire true beliefs, to avoid false beliefs, to have evidence enough to settle questions for ourselves and for others, to gain knowledge and understanding, and to communicate the knowledge and understanding we possess. But how these epistemic aims balance with each other, let alone how they balance with our other aims, is a complicated matter; we don’t want a rule about how to balance these aims that settles the matter in advance.

Focus for a moment on the general aims of acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs. We cannot, in advance of finding ourselves in a particular situation, settle the question of how much inquiry to pursue or how much evidence to gather so as to ward off the possibility of a false belief as we try to acquire a true belief. When Justin is invited to take part in the yearly bird count, he does his best over the course of two days to correctly identify the birds in his area. Quick counts are part of this, and occasional mis-identifications are bound to happen. An occasional error is tolerated because the aim is to have a fairly capacious count. Imagine for instance the probability of mistaking a rare bird for a native is very small, and what it would take to rule out this alternative is very laborious—it would involve every attempted identification of a native. Justin

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<sup>8</sup> Hart, *The Concept of Law*, p. 129. Interestingly, Hart suggests a social dimension to the story of our necessarily incomplete knowledge of our aims: owing to the fact that we have the general aim of balancing our interests and the interests of others, we face unexpected tests of our understanding of our aims in particular situations where other’s interests become known. Of course, one might add that this is because *we have an interest in balancing the interests of others* against our own.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 128. This is often the case, though not always. Hart notes that some rules are absolute.

forgoes the laborious process in order to meet the aim of a generally reliable count. If the generally reliable count is not what Justin is after, and the undesirability of error were greater, then Justin may look for more evidence, capturing and examining individual birds. In weighing competing epistemic aims, then, situations can differ in the way one's aims are to be balanced.

The diagnosis of the problem of relevance is that at the root of the problem is our lack of foreknowledge of how our general aims are to be met in specific situations. If this diagnosis is correct, how can we tackle the problem?

### 3. Hart's strategy

Hart observes that a rule governing conduct cannot be "so detailed that the question whether it applied or not to a particular case was always settled in advance, and never involved, at the point of actual application, a fresh choice between open alternatives." A skeptic might jump to the conclusion that therefore no rules or principles can govern our conduct. But this is too fast. Hart counters that the law may yet be encoded in rules, because the law has strategies for avoiding rules that are so "detailed."

Hart articulates two strategies: the first strategy applies in cases where we can anticipate enough about our interests and future situations to set up an administrative body to handle questions about how to interpret and apply general rules. Hart's second strategy is, for our purposes here, more interesting: it applies where "the range of circumstances, though very varied, covers familiar features of common experience." In such cases, Hart notes, "*common judgments of what is reasonable* can be used..." to interpret and apply general rules to particular cases (Hart, 132).

An absolute and inflexible rule requiring one *always* to stop, look, and listen for traffic at a light, might needlessly slow one's journey to the hospital with someone who is bleeding to death. (Hart, 133) We have a general aim to secure people against harm, and that aim is not served by an absolute rule. Contra the skeptic this fact doesn't force us to abandon efforts to govern our conduct with rules of the road. What's needed is the flexibility to make further choices about our specific aims in specific circumstances; and we can gain the needed flexibility with a rule that calls for the use of judgment about what is reasonable in the circumstances. Instead of saying that due care in driving absolutely requires us to "stop, look and listen for traffic", we say that one should "exercise reasonable care."

Hart's suggestion is that we can state flexible rules through an appeal to what is reasonable, so that users of the rule are instructed to use their judgment, making "a fresh choice" and deciding how the rule applies to a particular case. In so doing, a judgment of what is reasonable determines how one's general aims are to be realized in the situation at hand.

Hart's suggestion raises pressing questions: how are judgments of what is reasonable produced? What makes a person reasonable?

#### 4. The reasonable person

Much ink has been spilled in jurisprudence arguing that the reasonable person standard can be summed up in the rules of a chosen moral theory.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, John Gardner argues that the reasonable person standard is an "open standard": its content is only that the reasonable person is *justified*, or *acts on undefeated reasons*.<sup>11</sup> I suggest that for the purpose of making sense of ordinary epistemic practices, it makes sense to extract what we mean by "reasonable person" from reflection on ordinary usage.

As we ordinarily use the term "reasonable person", the following truisms hold:

- (a) A reasonable person can judge questions of widely disparate kinds. "Am I being reasonable/unreasonable in doing this?" takes an endless variety of objects, each of which require balancing an untold variety of values. ("Am I being reasonable in thinking there are aliens?" requires sensitivity to epistemic values (evidence, likelihoods, testimony); "Am I being reasonable in asking my friend to babysit again?" requires sensitivity to social and moral values, and so on. A key feature of the reasonable person is her general-purpose sensitivity to, and ability to make judgments about, competing values of widely different kinds.
- (b) A reasonable person thinks well, has some degree of intelligence, is sensible; but mere intelligence and logical thinking is not enough to be reasonable. Here we can think of cases real and imagined: Think of a highly crafty individual who sets himself an awful end—Shakespeare's Richard III who chooses "to prove a villain." One has to use one's reasoning to act for the good, not for evil, if one is reasonable. Decency and intelligence are not sufficient ingredients for being reasonable, but they are necessary.
- (c) What is reasonable depends on what one can be expected to already know. If you are answering a question in an exam about probability, it might be reasonable to assign equal probabilities to the outcome that a thumbtack lands on its point, heads up, and to the outcome that it lands on its tail, point down. No one expects you to already know facts of mundane physics in order to demonstrate your knowledge of probability theory. If you are faced with riding a bike behind a truck that drops

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<sup>10</sup> Within tort law, for instance, Kantians argue that Kant's doctrine of the equality of all free agents makes best sense of legal standards of care, as well as the asymmetrical duties that lie at the foot of tort theory. (Wright, "Standards of Care in Negligence Law.") Consequentialists argue the law's concern for equality is best served by attention to outcomes on a social scale. (Landes and Posner, *The Economic Structure of Tort Law* (1987).) Rawlsians import a variety of themes from political theory into tort law. (Zipursky, "Rawls in Tort Theory: Themes and Counter-Themes.") These competing theories color the content of the "reasonable person."

<sup>11</sup> Gardner, "The Many Faces of the Reasonable Person," 16. Gardner, "The Mysterious Case of the Reasonable Person," 299.

thumbtacks in your path, it is not reasonable to expect that only half the tacks will present a problem. Everyone expects you to know facts of mundane physics, if you're riding a bike.

- (d) The reasonable person will see things from another person's point of view. Being reasonable means being able to judge matters from another's perspective, in some cases, even forming one's own reasons with a view to the reasons of other (reasonable) people.

These truisms give us a start on understanding what reasonableness is. A person is reasonable when she is sensitive to what's important in a situation, shows tact and proportionality in her responses and a sensible concern for others, is disposed to keep in view her own ends and aims as well as those of others, takes into consideration the facts of a situation, sizes up the reasons for and against various courses of action, including the reasons others see, and acts for the good in accord with those reasons.

## 5. Reasonableness and objectivity

We can see why "common judgments of what is reasonable" satisfactorily resolve how our general aims take shape in particular situations, in a manner acceptable to the law. In the law we seek to govern our lives together, and we need to hold our actions to a standard of justification that represents the aims of other (reasonable) agents. Part of being reasonable is being good at weighing aims, interests and reasons, not just from one's own perspective but also with an eye to how other (reasonable) people would weigh them. Because of this, "common judgments of what is reasonable" are judgments that can be expected to represent the aims of all concerned.

A similar need explains why reasonableness sets the standard of relevance for knowledge. Knowing that P is not a matter of believing P in accord with one's personal epistemic standards. What makes a belief knowledgeable is that it meets an objective standard of evidence. The sense of "objective" here is not that of *mind-independence*—after all, what is relevant depends on human aims and interests. The sense of "objective" pertinent here is, in the first instance, *not subjective*. What is deemed relevant is not simply a reflection of the speaker's own subjective take on what is important. It is also worth noting here that reasonableness is not just a matter of being subjectively epistemically rational, in the sense of forming one's beliefs on the strength of sufficiently high subjective credence.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Thus, on the relevance as reasonableness account, one avenue for arguing for pragmatic encroachment is not open: that avenue begins with "pragmatic creedal reductivism" (Ross and Schroeder, "Belief, Credence, and Pragmatic Encroachment") on which belief is subjective credence above a threshold, where practical factors control the threshold; so practical factors will also thereby control knowledge. On the relevance as reasonableness account, by contrast, knowledge is sensitive to those practical factors that a reasonable person would be concerned about, and these need not be the factors that affect one's subjective credence.

Some argue that the need for objectivity in knowledge can only be met by an absolute standard. For instance, Edward Craig observes that the concept of knowledge is the concept of an epistemic achievement that others can recognize, and can see as satisfying their standards; to know is to meet standards acceptable to others who are possibly far removed in time and place, and to have evidence sufficient to rule out the alternatives that these others would find relevant.<sup>13</sup> Craig further argues that the demand for objectivity in our knowledge claims pushes us toward acknowledging more and more alternatives as relevant, to address the needs and interests of others whose interests we cannot immediately envision. Only the practical consideration of maintaining the practical usefulness of the concept of knowledge halts the pressure toward an absolute standard on which knowing requires eliminating *all* defeaters—this is a standard so demanding it results in skepticism, and we pull back from this standard, in light of our practical needs for the concept to do some work for us in assessing real epistemic agents.<sup>14</sup>

While I think that Craig is right that our concept of knowledge requires objective standards, he is wrong to suppose that anything short of skeptically demanding standards fails to have the required objectivity. The reasonable person standard is both an objective standard and an anti-skeptical one: a reasonable person standard lets us stop the pressure toward ever more demanding understandings of relevance, and yet it is objective in the required sense that it satisfies all reasonable parties. (And why should we satisfy any others?) No one person's subjective judgment about relevance determines what is in fact relevant. Speakers and hearers may have interests in the truth of P that help to shape how much evidence is enough to know P, but ultimately how much is enough for knowledge is settled by a reasonable person's take on these competing interests.<sup>15</sup>

## 6. Relevance as Reasonableness

Applying Hart's strategy to the problem of relevance we say that if S knows P is true then S has a true belief that P and has evidence sufficient to rule out all the relevant alternatives to P; an alternative is relevant if it is one that a reasonable person would want ruled out before taking herself to know P. (We're not giving a conceptual analysis here, so the use of "know" in the necessary conditions for knowledge is not a problem.)

Not only does appeal to the reasonable person standard resolve the problem of relevance, it also explains and vindicates important features of our practice in making, criticizing and retracting knowledge claims. For instance, a reasonable person standard is a standard to which one has some *access* in virtue of common world-knowledge and a less than super-human capacity for impartiality. So one can use one's own

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<sup>13</sup> Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, ch.XII.

<sup>15</sup> The relevance as reasonableness view contrasts with practical interests accounts. Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries*; Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*.



take on what is reasonable to worry about, and in turn gauge whether one is in any position to take up the commitments of claiming knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Likewise the standard permits hearers to use their take on what is reasonable to interpret what the speaker is committed to. One is sometimes in the dark about the idiosyncratic needs and practical interests of one's interlocutors, and coordination around a standard of reasonableness permits us to negotiate our ignorance about each other. Our need to understand each other's knowledge claims, and to coordinate our epistemic lives more generally, is the impetus for an *objective, flexible* and *accessible* standard of relevance, and reasonableness delivers on all these fronts.<sup>17</sup>

## 7. Pragmatic Encroachment

How do practical interests or stakes affect knowledge on this view? Does treating relevance as reasonableness open the door to so-called "pragmatic encroachment"? Pragmatic encroachment is the view that what is of interest to or at stake for a person S in a given context affects whether S knows that a given empirical proposition P is true, because knowledge is a relation among both *practical factors* (such as what is at stake for S) and *epistemic* or "truth-related" factors (such as how much evidence S has).<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere I argue that knowledge is a thoroughly epistemic relation: knowledge is a relation involving only the subject and truth-related factors, such as her evidence, the target proposition, and alternative propositions. Moreover, I argue that the knowledge relation is constant across contexts. (These claims can hold while it is also the case that the *truth-value* of a knowledge claim is determined by the particular situation in which the claim is uttered, if we adopt a situation- or occasion-sensitive semantics.<sup>19</sup>) Like other semantic contextualists I resist pragmatic encroachment by repositioning the effect of practical factors outside the knowledge relation and within the semantics of knowledge claims. Semantic contextualism lets one hold that practical interests in the question of proposition's truth only affect whether it is correct to ascribe knowledge, while the knowledge relation itself remains a relation among truth-related factors.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Just to be clear, I don't hold that people explicitly conceive of themselves as adhering to a reasonable person standard; rather my claim is that it is a good rationalizing explanation of our use of the concept of knowledge and of our ascriptions of knowledge. It is as if we agreed to make our knowledge claims in accord with a reasonable person standard.

<sup>17</sup> Lawlor, *Assurance*, ch 1.

<sup>18</sup> Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries*; Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*.

<sup>19</sup> Kompa, "The Semantics of Knowledge Attributions"; Lawlor, *Assurance: An Austinian View of Knowledge and Knowledge Claims*; Travis, *Occasion-Sensitivity*. Travis speaks of reasonable people interpreting each other's utterances, so the idea of a reasonable interpreter has a central role in his articulation of the situation or occasion-based theory of meaning.

<sup>20</sup> Semantic contextualism broadly construed lets us maintain what DeRose calls the "intellectualist view." DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism and Context*, vol. 1, chap. 6. Within the broad category of "semantic contextualism" there are views that hold that practical interests can control *which knowledge relation one stands in* to the target proposition, and so affect which proposition one expresses with a knowledge claim. Cohen, "Pragmatic Encroachment and Having Reasons." The only problem with this approach is difficulties with knowledge reports on account of allowing the knowledge relation to differ across

This semantic response to pragmatic encroachment is discussed at length in recent literature. I won't discuss it further here, preferring instead to focus on the question, if knowledge is a relation of only truth-related factors, why do practical factors have any role in settling the truth-value of knowledge claims? What gives practical factors this role? This question deserves some attention. The answer I'll suggest is that although knowledge is an epistemic relation among truth-related factors, our path to knowledge involves inquiry (or more broadly epistemic activity<sup>21</sup>); this opens the door to practical considerations having an effect on the acquisition of knowledge. I'll further suggest that this fact creates a role for reasonableness in the acquisition of knowledge.

To spell all this out, let's start with the relation of reasonableness and practical rationality.

## 8. Reasonableness and practical rationality

Recall we have said that a person is reasonable when she is sensitive to what's important in a situation, shows tact and proportionality in her responses and a sensible concern for others, is disposed to keep in view her own ends and aims as well as those of others, takes into consideration the facts of a situation, sizes up the reasons for and against various courses of action, including the reasons others see, and acts for the good in accord with those reasons. How does this relate to a person's being practically rational?

There are different views of practical rationality. And different views entail different relations between reasonableness and practical rationality. For instance, on Hume's view of the nature of practical reason, reasonableness and practical rationality come clean apart. For Hume, practical rationality is a matter of determining the means to ends that are settled independently by one's desires or preferences. On this understanding of practical rationality there is no particular force a practically rational person will feel in the face of considerations that are provided by another person's desires or preferences, no particular need to attend to another's reasons. But the reasonable person is reasonable insofar as she does take into account the reasons that others see, and balances these all in deciding on a course of action. So practical rationality and reasonableness come apart, on the Humean view.

For a different view, consider Philippa Foot's account of the nature of practical rationality. In brief summary, Foot sees practical rationality as deriving from goodness of the will.<sup>22</sup> Here's an analogy. An owl

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contexts. For this reason, it is better to adopt a non-indexical contextualism as in Kompa (ibid), or a situation semantic contextualism, as in Lawlor (ibid), Travis (ibid).

<sup>21</sup> To keep the discussion simple, I am not distinguishing between acquiring knowledge from basic perceptual or memorial resources and acquiring knowledge from complex, possibly long term, courses of inquiry. The story about relevance and balancing one's aims is meant to apply to both, but stating it for both kinds of case would lead to unhelpful complexity here.

<sup>22</sup> "There is no criterion of practical rationality that is not derived from goodness of will." Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 11.

hunts by night, and having night vision is crucial to its success. Facts about the life of owls means night vision has a special role. If an owl does not have night vision, for whatever reason, that is a defect. The owl's vision is not good, we say. If an owl does have night vision, the owl's vision is (to that extent) good. It serves an owl in the pursuit of its owl-y life. Analogously, a human being has a *will*—roughly, a disposition to consider and then act on factual considerations in matters that involve choice and following through on one's choices. Facts about the life of humans give this feature, the will, a special role. If a person fails to consider and act on reasons, that is a defect. And if a person does consider and act on reasons, her will is to that extent good (Foot, 66). The sort of goodness here is “natural goodness”: a feature, or trait, or its operation is good, or as it should be, if it improves the creature's chances of carrying out its natural life functions and succeeding in its natural life cycle, in its natural habitat. A blind owl can live successfully in a zoo, but that doesn't alter the fact that its vision is bad. It's crucial to Foot's view that natural goodness can be self-regarding or other-regarding, since some improvements of a creature's chances depend on the chances of others of its kind—its mate, its offspring, or its hunting partners. Since some species are cooperative, a feature can be good because it helps a conspecific (mate, offspring) succeed in its natural life cycle. Given our highly social form of life, taking others' interests into account is indispensable. Just as having night vision is a good thing in an owl, having a will that is responsive to factual considerations in a way that promotes successful shared human life is a good thing in a human.

On Foot's view of practical rationality, it involves being sensitive to the various reasons for action a given situation presents and acting for the good on an appropriate balance of these reasons. And importantly, on her view, practical rationality requires the ability to weigh other-regarding reasons alongside self-regarding reasons. In consequence, practical rationality as Foot conceives it is closer to what we have described as reasonableness.

However even on Foot's view, there are still key differences between practical rationality and reasonableness: As we noted above, it is a truism that a reasonable person will try to see things from another's point of view. This is not part of Foot's account of practical rationality, which only requires a disposition to weigh other-regarding reasons, and does not incorporate the demand that the person's own reasons are formed with a view to reasons as other (reasonable) people see them. We also noted that a reasonable person is sensitive to, and able to make judgments about a variety of values; the reasonable person is thus able to weigh both theoretical and practical reasons in the same course of deliberation. There is no such general-purpose sensitivity or ability on Foot's view of practical rationality, so reasonableness involves but is not equivalent to practical rationality.

Reflecting on our truisms, it strikes one that what reasonableness is most akin to is what the virtue theorist calls “practical wisdom”—the virtue that includes an ability to weigh reasons of both a practical and a

theoretical nature.<sup>23</sup> Reasonableness can at first glance seem to be a practical ability, but it is more than this—it is a good trait that enables one to navigate complex relations among one’s practical and theoretical aims. We’ll see how this makes reasonableness the quality that one needs to discern relevance.

## 9. Why practical factors have a role in determining the truth-value of knowledge claims

Let’s return to the question of why practical factors have any role in settling the truth-value of knowledge claims, given that knowledge is a purely epistemic relation.

The first thing to note is that people have different viewpoints on the same epistemic landscape. They have different levels of risk aversion; they may balance the risk of falsehood and the reward of truth differently. And they may assign different probabilities on the same evidence, because they have different prior probabilities, and so on. Even the same person in different situations can be more or less risk averse depending on what hangs on the truth of a particular proposition, and can assign a different probability to a given possibility depending on which rules or heuristics are used to assess the evidence. Reasonable people may differ over such matters. Rawls, for whom reasonableness is a central feature of political morality, acknowledges that because of the “burdens of judgment” reasonable people will disagree about what is fair, what is to be done, and how to live.<sup>24</sup> Burdens of judgment are such things as that evidence is hard to assess, concepts are vague, the weight we give reasons can vary, and norms are complex and hard to assess.<sup>25</sup>

We can expect these same burdens of judgment to affect judgments about how to conduct inquiry, and about how much evidence is required to attain knowledge. Sometimes it will be practical interests that affect judgments about inquiry. Although knowledge is a relation among epistemic factors, one’s interest in knowing (i.e. being in the knowledge relation to) a target proposition can shape one’s inquiry. Person S<sub>1</sub> has a greater practical interest in knowing P than person S<sub>2</sub> does. Consequently S<sub>1</sub> sees the need for evidence differently than S<sub>2</sub>. The burdens of judgment are felt differently by S<sub>1</sub> and S<sub>2</sub>. Suppose Omar is invited to hunt for a member of a rare species that looks like a native; his identifying one would launch his career from an amateur to professional ornithologist. Omar has a greater interest in the truth of *this bird is the rare species* than does Justin, the contented amateur birder. He will do more to make certain *that this bird is a native* than Justin will in the course of his bird count.

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<sup>23</sup> The ability to judge reasons of all kinds is bound up with our problem of codification, as Hursthouse notes that moral theorists of all kinds appreciate that rules must be interpreted: “... Kant himself insists that we can have no algorithm for judgement, since every application of a rule would itself need supplementing with further rules.” Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 2:55. These remarks resonate with our earlier discussion of the problem of codification in the law.

<sup>24</sup> That is, we will have different “comprehensive doctrines.” Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 56–57.

<sup>25</sup> Rawls *Justice as Fairness*, 35.

One's practical interest can shape one's inquiry, and in consequence of this fact, reasoning that weighs practical factors may be engaged as one seeks knowledge. But this does not mean that *practical rationality* is called on in seeking knowledge. One's aim is ultimately epistemic—the aim of gaining knowledge. This fact gives reasonableness an important role. It is reasonableness, and not just practical rationality, that lets a person keep in view one sort of aim (in this case an epistemic one) while balancing competing values and interests of a very different (in this case practical) kind. Because of the burdens of judgment there may be practical factors that speak for or against particular courses of inquiry. The reasonable person judges the matter of how to weigh these practical factors. The reasonable person is able to keep her ultimate general epistemic aim in view, even as she weighs practical reasons for keeping an inquiry going or cutting it short.

With a reasonable person standard of relevance, the mere fact of greater practical interest is not such as to force more alternatives to be relevant. Likewise the mere fact of little practical interest does not in itself make fewer alternatives relevant. It is reasonable for Omar to do some extra checks before making his identification—he may consider some still more rare birds as further alternatives.<sup>26</sup> Omar's greater practical interests can make it reasonable for him to be more risk averse than Justin, and so check against more alternatives. But there are limits on what it is reasonable for Omar to consider. It may be reasonable for Omar, given his situation, to check against very unlikely alternatives, but it may not be reasonable; if Omar has done all that any reasonable person could be expected to do in his situation, and yet he still holds back, then he is letting his fear of error stand in the way of gaining knowledge. The reasonable person keeps in view the ultimate aim of gaining knowledge about P. So the practical importance (or lack of thereof) of P's truth may encourage (discourage) a reasonable person to take more (less) effort in inquiry, but it does not control judgments of relevance.

Practical factors do not enter into the knowledge relation. Rather, practical factors can help to shape one's path to knowledge; practical factors can affect the acquisition of knowledge, but cannot affect what knowledge is. Securing knowledge requires keeping one's epistemic aim in view while reasoning about how to fulfill that aim. Attaining knowledge requires balancing all one's aims in a given situation—it requires reasonableness.

## 10. Disagreement, skepticism and other threats to knowledge

I have argued that reasonableness is the right standard of relevance because it lets us pursue our epistemic aims in a way that is responsive not just to our own viewpoint but to others' viewpoints, and is in this way an objective standard. I have also suggested that reasonableness is not just a matter of being subjectively

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<sup>26</sup> Compare Stroud's plane spotters here. Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*.

epistemically rational, in the sense of forming one's beliefs on the strength of sufficiently high subjective credence. Further, reasonableness bears a relation to both epistemic and practical rationality—but it is not equivalent to either of these. Reasonableness allows us to keep our epistemic aims in view as we pursue inquiry in a rational way.

Here's a worry: on this account won't the possibility of disagreement about what is reasonable undermine the (extent of, or possibility of) determinate truth of knowledge claims? In cases where there is no single answer to the question of what the reasonable person will see as relevant, there is no answer to the question whether one has knowledge or not. A knowledge claim in such a case is without a truth-value. If this happens routinely, many knowledge claims will be without truth-values.

First, we note that the very idea of knowledge claims with indeterminate truth-value does not shock. The worry here is rather that relevance as reasonableness opens the door to more indeterminacy than we expect, too much for the account to be plausible. How frequent is unresolvable disagreement among reasonable people about what is relevant to a knowledge claim? This is an empirical question, and I won't venture a guess. What can be said, though, is that facts about reasonableness work to limit the frequency of destructive disagreement. Reasonable people who disagree initially, due to differences in risk aversion or other burdens of judgment, may yet reach reasonable agreement about what to treat as relevant.

Expecting people to reach agreement about what is relevant is not the same as expecting them to reach agreement about moral claims. A reasonable person may be willing to do more epistemic work than they were first inclined to do, in order to satisfy other reasonable people who are more risk averse. Or more risk averse people may be willing to tolerate checking a bit less. Reasonable people may after all reach mutual agreement on what alternatives to treat as relevant, as long as they have the chance to air their differences and reflect on them. Relevance has an epistemology of its own. Sometimes it takes work to determine what is relevant, and it may take compromise.

Disagreement—and I might also add skeptical challenges from *outré* counterexamples—are not formidable threats to the possibility of human knowledge. Disagreement among reasonable people happens, but it needn't threaten the extent or possibility of human knowledge. Skeptical counterexamples may serve to teach us about reasonableness, but their conceivability does not bring down knowledge either.

What is a threat to knowledge is the possibility of our failing to be reasonable. Not just one person at a time, a small failure here or there, but widespread community-wide failure. Such a loss of reasonableness is much more of a threat to knowledge. Loss of reasonableness brings with it the loss of the ability to rise to the standards of knowledge, and to make and assess knowledge claims. This is a much more disturbing possibility

than the possibility of perfect ringers, deceptive counterfeits, or reasonable disagreements about evidential standards.\*

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