

Fallibilism and concessive knowledge attributions

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David Lewis (1996: 549) writes, concerning the epistemological doctrine of fallibilism:

If you claim that S knows that P, and yet you grant that S cannot eliminate a certain possibility in which not-P, it certainly seems as if you have granted that S does not after all know that P. To speak of fallible knowledge, of knowledge despite uneliminated possibility of error, just *sounds* contradictory.

Lewis concludes that fallibilism is uncomfortable, though preferable to scepticism. However, he believes that contextualism about knowledge allows us to ‘dodge the choice’ between fallibilism and scepticism. For the contextualist semantics for ‘know’ can explain the oddity of fallibilism, without landing us into scepticism.

The challenge facing the non-contextualist advocate of fallibilism is to explain the oddity of the kinds of claims Lewis discusses, without embracing contextualism. That is, the challenge is to explain why it seems that *speaking* of fallible knowledge is odd, without impugning the truth of fallibilism, or adopting contextualism. Following Patrick Rysiew (2001: 493), let us call statements of the form ‘S knows that *p*, but it’s possible that *q*’ (where *q* entails not-*p*) *concessive knowledge attributions*. Here are a few such cases:

- (1) (a) I know that Harry is a zebra, but it’s possible that Harry is a painted mule.
- (b) John knows that Harry is a zebra, but it’s possible that Harry is a painted mule.
- (c) John knows that Harry is a zebra, but it’s possible for John that Harry is a painted mule.

It should be uncontroversial that, generally, utterances of the sentences in (1) result in infelicity. What I will reject is the additional claim that this fact impugns fallibilism.

The strategy I employ is similar to that taken in Rysiew 2001: 492ff. Like him, I seek to provide a non-contextualist explanation of why uttering the sentences in (1) is odd that is compatible with the truth of fallibilism. However, Rysiew provides a *fully pragmatic* explanation of the oddity of utterances of the sentences in (1). According to him, ‘... in everyday speech, “It’s possible that *q*” usually serves to (pragmatically)

impart that the speaker *doesn't* know that not- q and doesn't know that q ' (493). Though I support Rysiew's general strategy, I cannot accept the explanation he provides. My problem with it is that it is mysterious to me what he takes the *semantic content* of epistemic possibility statements to be. For Rysiew claims that the fact that uttering any of the sentences in (1) results in oddity is due to *just* pragmatic facts, namely an implicature associated with epistemic possibility statements. This entails that he believes that it can in fact be epistemically possible for a speaker that q , even though that speaker knows that not- q . This is an unacceptable consequence. The oddity of most utterances of these sentences has something to do with the *semantics* of epistemic possibility statements.

If Rysiew were right, then, while the sentences in (1) are not assertable, they would nevertheless be *true*. So, the fact that uttering the sentences in (1) is almost always infelicitous would not entail that the propositions thereby expressed were false. Hence, if Rysiew were right, Lewis's point would not impugn the truth of fallibilism. In contrast, with the exception of (1b), I believe that utterances of the sentences in (1) do in fact almost always express false propositions. But the reason I do not think this aids Lewis's criticism of fallibilism is that I do not think that the false propositions usually expressed by utterances of (1a) and (1c) express the fallibilist position. Therefore, I do not think that their falsity impugns fallibilism.

What is fallibilism in epistemology? Fallibilism is a certain claim about the character of one's evidence for one's knowledge. Fallibilism is the doctrine that someone can know that p , even though their evidence for p is *logically consistent* with the truth of not- p . For example, a fallibilist maintains that I may know that I have hands, on the basis of evidence that is logically consistent with the remote possibility that I do not have hands, because I am dreaming after a particularly terrible accident. What I will argue is that, when utterances of (1a) and (1c) express false propositions, the fact that they are false does not refute the fallibilist position.

The most natural reading of 'possible' in the sentences in (1) is as epistemic possibility. The correct characterization of epistemic possibility is a vexed matter. But in interpreting the sentences in (1), the first thing to bear in mind is that the epistemic use of 'possible' involves *implicit anaphora*; a proposition may be epistemically possible for one person, but not for another. One plausible explanation for its relationality comes from the following principle:

(Epistemic Possibility) It is possible that p is true if and only if nothing is known that obviously (metaphysically) entails not- p .

Since knowledge requires a knower, epistemic possibility does as well. Claims of epistemic possibility are relative to knowers. So the right statement of (Epistemic Possibility) is:

(Epistemic Possibility*) It is possible_A that p is true if and only if what A knows does not, in a manner that is obvious to A, entail not- p .¹

Assuming (Epistemic Possibility*), and recognizing the relational nature of epistemic possibility, allows for an explanation of the data in (1). The sentences in (1) are equivalent to:

- (2) (a) I know that Harry is a zebra, but what I know does not entail, in a manner that is obvious to me, that Harry is not a painted mule.
- (b) John knows that Harry is a zebra, but what I know does not entail, in a manner that is obvious to me, that Harry is not a painted mule.
- (c) John knows that Harry is a zebra, but what John knows does not entail, in a manner that is obvious to him, that Harry is not a painted mule.

Now that we are clearer on the contents of the sentences in (1), it is apparent that utterances of (1a) and (1c) almost always express false propositions. In both cases, one asserts of a person that she knows something that obviously entails that q , and she does not know anything that, in a manner obvious to her, entails that q . If the person to whom the knowledge is ascribed is clearly sufficiently intelligent so that inferences such as that Harry's being a zebra entails Harry's not being a painted mule are obvious to her, each of these sentences will express an obviously false proposition.

So, given the semantic content of epistemic possibility talk, an utterance of (1a) and (1c) expresses what would be expressed by an utterance of (2a) and (2c). This explains the typical oddity of utterances of these sentences. If the person in question (the speaker or John) is clearly minimally intelligent, the proposition thereby expressed is clearly false. But now we can see that the fact that such utterances are almost always odd does not raise any problem for fallibilism. The obvious falsity of the propositions expressed by most utterances of (1a) and (1c) is consistent with the truth of the claim that one can know that p , on the basis of evidence that is logically consistent with not- p .

(2b) is more complicated. (2a) and (2c) are odd because they usually would express propositions that would be clearly false. (2b), in contrast, does not. So, this Lewisian argument against fallibilism reduces down to the oddity of (2b) (and hence (1b)). I will now argue that the explanation

¹ See Keith DeRose 1991 for a similar proposal. DeRose's proposal differs in that it postulates additional context-sensitivity that I believe is unwarranted. Nevertheless, DeRose makes, within a different context, some of the same points I make here, though of course he does not apply it to a non-contextualist defence of fallibilism.

for why utterances of (1b) are invariably odd also does not impugn fallibilism.

First, it is odd to utter sentences like (3), where it is obvious that p entails q :

(3) p , but what I know does not entail q .

Here is a theoretical reason behind the oddity of utterances of (3). According to the knowledge account of assertion, the norm for assertion is knowledge. That is, the constitutive rule for assertion is that in order to assert that p , one must know that p . As a result, on the knowledge account of assertion, uttering a sentence S *implicates* that one knows the proposition expressed by S .² If the knowledge account of assertion is correct, one can explain the oddity of utterances of (3).

By assumption, it is obvious that p entails q . So, in uttering (3), one implicates that one knows a proposition, and that proposition obviously entails q . But that is just what one is denying in the second conjunct of (3). So, assuming the knowledge account of assertion, asserting (3) is self-undermining.

This is the first step in the explanation of the oddity of utterances of (1b) and (2b). The second step in the explanation involves the innocuous premiss that the word ‘know’ is *factive*. That is, X’s knowing that p entails that p . The factivity of ‘know’ entails that asserting (2b) commits one to:

(4) Harry is a zebra, but what I know does not entail, in a manner obvious to me, that Harry is not a painted mule.

And (4) is an instance of schema (3) (where it is obvious that p entails q). If the knowledge account of assertion is correct, then the oddity occasioned by utterances of instances of (3) is pragmatic in nature. That is, if the knowledge account of assertion is correct, the oddity of (4) (and hence (2b) and (1b)) is due to a fact about the speech act of assertion, that the norms governing it are linked to knowledge. Since pragmatics is the study of speech acts, and assertion is a speech act, this is a fact in the domain of pragmatics. The oddity of these sentences thus does not require a contextualist semantic solution.

I have, in the explanation of the oddity of (4) (and hence (1b) and (2b)), appealed to the knowledge account of assertion. Keith DeRose (2002) has forcefully argued that the knowledge account of assertion aids the contextualist about knowledge. Though I do not accept his arguments, it is worth noting that one does not need to appeal to a premiss so theoretically

² ‘“Dogs bark, but I don’t know that they do” is [absurd] ... because by asserting p positively you imply, though you don’t assert, that you know that p ’ (Moore 1993: 277).

weighty as the knowledge account of assertion. It is simply a fact that utterances of (4) are odd; all that is needed is that this oddity is due to pragmatics, and not to semantics.

Let us now return to Lewis's claim that it is odd 'If you claim that S knows that P, and yet you grant that S cannot eliminate a certain possibility in which not-P.' Any instance of this schema will be an example of the kinds given by the sentences in (1). And there is no obstacle blocking the fallibilist from endorsing these explanations of the oddity of concessive knowledge attributions. The fact that utterances of (1a) and (1c) are generally odd is due to the fact that they generally express obvious falsehoods, and the fact that utterances of (1b) are generally odd is due to pragmatics. In none of these cases, do the explanations for the oddity of utterances of the sentences in (1) cast aspersions on the doctrine that one can know that *p*, even though one's evidence for *p* is logically consistent with the truth of not-*p*.

There are other odd sounding concessive knowledge claims. Consider, for example, the sentences in (5):

- (5) (a) I know that I have hands, but I haven't ruled out that I'm just a brain in a vat with no body at all.
 (b) I know that Harry is a zebra, but I haven't excluded the possibility that Harry is a painted mule.

These sentences certainly sound odd. But they do not overtly contain the term 'possible'. So one might think that fallibilism is committed to the acceptability of these sentences.

But the fallibilist can account for the oddity of the sentences in (5) by appeal to an argument like the one just offered. Consider the phrase 'excluded'. What is it for someone to exclude a possibility? According to Fred Dretske (2000: 57), 'In saying that [someone] is in a position to exclude these possibilities I mean that his evidence or justification for thinking these alternatives are *not* the case must be good enough to say that he *knows* they are not the case.' This is a natural reading both of 'exclude' and 'rule out'. But if this (or something stronger) is the right rendering of 'exclude' and 'rule out', then the sentences in (5) express:

- (6) (a) I know that I have hands, but I don't know that I'm not a brain in a vat with no body at all.
 (b) I know that Harry is a zebra, but I don't know that Harry is not a painted mule.

Now there are some positions that are versions of fallibilism that do entail the truth (and presumably the acceptability) of the sentences in (6). For example, fallibilist accounts, such as Nozick's, that deny single premiss epistemic closure have this consequence. But it is not the case that any

non-contextualist account of knowledge that is fallibilist predicts that the sentences in (6) can be both true and felicitously assertable.³

A final set of odd sounding concessive knowledge claims involve instances of the schema:

(7) X knows that p , though there is a chance that not- p .

In some cases, the oddity of such utterances has to do with the falsity of the knowledge claim (in particular, when what is at issue is some sort of objective chance). But in many cases in which these utterances seem odd, it is because much of our ordinary talk of probability is epistemic in character. So the same explanation of the oddity of the sentences in (1) can be given to explain the general oddity of instances of (7), that is, an explanation that is independent of the truth of fallibilism.

So, I don't find Lewis's motivation for contextualism compelling. The oddity of concessive knowledge attributions does not pose a general problem for the non-contextualist fallibilist.⁴

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³ For example, what is sometimes called 'sensitive moderate invariantism', the position defended by John Hawthorne (2004: ch. 4) and myself in forthcoming work is an example of a fallibilist position that is consistent with single-premiss epistemic closure.

⁴ This paper originated as a section of a larger paper, 'On the case for contextualism', delivered at the 2002 University of Massachusetts conference on Contextualism in Epistemology (this larger paper was never published). In the intervening years, some of the points have also been made in Hawthorne 2004. Discussions with Keith DeRose and John Hawthorne have been helpful; my greatest thanks for discussion of the issues in this paper go to Timothy Williamson.