

Careful with knowledge ascriptions!

Mikkel Gerken: *On Folk Epistemology: How we think and talk about knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Forthcoming in *Metascience*.

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Epistemology has a long history of drawing on intuitive judgements induced by philosophical cases, such as Gettier, fake barns, and bank cases. Such intuitive judgements are easily available, given that knowledge is a familiar turf for humans. We commonly think in terms of knowledge and make ascriptions of it in a variety of contexts in a more or less systematic manner. In this way we seem to exhibit *folk epistemology*. But why think that our folk epistemology has any bearing on substantial *epistemological* claims? And what is the appropriate methodological stance that epistemologists should take towards intuitive judgements resulting from folk epistemology? Mikkel Gerken's *On Folk Epistemology: How we think and talk about knowledge* is an impressive, systematic contribution to this debate.

The first chapter outlines the two main interrelated aims of the book. Gerken's first aim is to defend the orthodox view according to which whether a person knows that p is independent of contextually salient practical factors or possibilities of error (*strict purist invariantism*). Several empirical studies indicate that we tend to systematically deny knowledge to subjects in cases where the possibility of being in error becomes salient or where the stakes of acting on the basis of their epistemic position are high. Despite such tendencies, Gerken argues that neither the truth-conditions nor the truth-values of knowledge ascriptions depend on salient error-possibilities and practical factors. He defends strict purist invariantism against a variety of non-orthodox views according to which the truth-conditions and the truth-values of knowledge ascriptions can vary in these ways, e.g. contextualism, pragmatic encroachment, functional role views. The second main aim of the book is to argue against what Gerken calls the *straightforward* methodology, where intuitive judgements about knowledge ascriptions are treated as data for or against philosophical claims (DeRose 2009). Instead, Gerken defends an *equilibristic* methodology, where intuitive judgements must be critically assessed in light of theoretical considerations and empirical facts. So

assessed, intuitive judgements can provide important constraints on epistemological claims, but sometimes may need to be revised.

The connection between the two aims becomes apparent, once we realize that many arguments for the non-orthodox views are motivated by patterns of intuitive judgments about knowledge ascriptions made in cases where an error possibility becomes salient or the stakes of acting on a belief are high. Chapter 2 surveys reflective and empirical evidence presented in favour of the existence of such patterns. Gerken usefully disentangles three types of effects: a *salient alternative* effect, the inclination to deny a subject knowledge that *p* in the face of a salient alternative; a *contrast* effect, the inclination to ascribe knowledge depends on whether a certain alternative to knowledge that *p* is “in contrast”; and a *practical factors* effect, the inclination to ascribe knowledge can be affected by the salience of practical factors, such as the stakes of the speaker or subject. For all three effects, Gerken concludes, we find substantial, albeit non-uniform, evidence. The three puzzling patterns need to be addressed if the orthodox view on knowledge is to be defended.

The discussion becomes even more complicated since, as Gerken explains in Chapter 3, recent challenges against the orthodox view come in three forms: (1) from intuitive judgements as such; (2) from theoretical principles that describe systematic regularities between knowledge ascriptions, action and assertion (the knowledge norm of action (KNAC) and the knowledge norm of assertion (KNAS)); and (3) from communicative functions of knowledge ascriptions, e.g. to identify reliable informants, or to recommend action. Given that all three challenges are fuelled by the above described patterns of knowledge ascriptions, the bulk of argumentative work in the book is done by the methodological shift in how to treat intuitive judgements. Gerken adopts a fairly minimal conception, where intuitive judgements about knowledge ascriptions are unreflective propositional attitudes (56-57). Just as intuitive judgements resulting from folk psychology are critically assessed against theoretical assumptions and can be biased, so intuitive judgements resulting from folk epistemology can be biased and should be critically assessed. Gerken’s equilibristic methodology recommends that judgements resulting from folk epistemology can provide evidence for theoretical conclusions *only if* they can be integrated with theoretical claims and systematic comparisons of cases. Relatedly, their rejection requires principled reasons (59-60).

Chapter 4 provides theoretical arguments that seek to undermine the epistemological import of the three effects. For example, in reply to the salient alternative effect Gerken argues that in some such cases a subject may know that *p* even though she does not know that

the salient alternative is false (Relevance response). The reply presupposes that salient alternatives in such cases are *epistemically irrelevant*. An epistemically relevant alternative, according to Gerken, is one that describes epistemically normal circumstances, as determined by general facts about a subject's environment and whether or not she can access these facts. So construed, Gerken's epistemic relevance/irrelevance is a thoroughly externalist notion and a potential bone of contention in this debate.

The discussion about the salient alternatives effect is taken up again later in the book in Chapter 10, where Gerken provides an empirically informed explanation. Chapter 5 sets the stage for this part of the book by providing a thorough introduction to the underlying psychology of knowledge ascriptions. Drawing on the dual process theory and research in cognitive psychology, Gerken argues that knowledge ascriptions are governed by generally reliable heuristics that are, nevertheless, prone to the *epistemic focal bias*: whether a certain alternative is in focus or not may bias our judgements about knowledge ascriptions. Chapter 8 prepares the reader for linguistic considerations relevant to the communicative uses of knowledge ascriptions, by surveying vast research in cognitive pragmatics and psycholinguistics. A reader not familiar with the psychology and pragmatics literature will find these chapters genuinely instructive, and, given the scope of material, occasionally perhaps a bit overwhelming.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide arguments against the challenge from the knowledge norm of action (KNAC) and the knowledge norm of assertion (KNAS). The general line of the argument in both cases is that these norms reflect useful folk-epistemological heuristics, but are unsuitable as epistemological principles and should be replaced by Gerken's warrant-based norms, according to which action and assertion depend on the degree of warrant relative to a subject's context. Chapter 9 addresses the challenge from the communicative functions of knowledge ascriptions. Knowledge-talk is prominent in our lives and serves various purposes. However, if Gerken is right that even the most systematic communicative functions of knowledge ascriptions are pragmatic phenomena, then they do not contribute to the semantic content of 'knows'.

Final stabs at the puzzling patterns of intuitive judgements about knowledge ascriptions come in the last three chapters of the book, where the cog-psy machinery is put into use. In Chapter 10 Gerken argues that intuitive judgements underlying the salient alternative effect result from the epistemic focal bias. Epistemically irrelevant salient alternatives are processed as psychologically relevant and make us deny the ascription of knowledge to subjects that actually know, resulting in false negatives. In Chapter 11 Gerken

argues that in the contrast case effect, and due to the epistemic focal bias, epistemically relevant but non-salient alternatives are not processed as psychologically relevant. In effect, we tend to incorrectly ascribe knowledge to subjects that do not know (false positives). In Chapter 12 it is argued that the practical factors effect observed in cases that emphasize action can be explained in terms of the pragmatic *directive force* of knowledge ascriptions and without affecting the truth-values for ascribing knowledge. The three explanations draw on the proposed empirical framework and are supplemented with linguistic considerations.

Since it would be impossible to do justice to the rich and tightly argued contents of this book, I will instead make two general points about the methodological proposal developed there. The first worry that does not receive enough attention, concerns the underlying assumption about the analogy between folk psychology and folk epistemology that is prominent in the book. Gerken argues that intuitive judgements resulting from folk epistemology can be biased and should be subject to critical scrutiny, in a similar manner as judgements resulting from folk psychology. However, when examining responses made in reasoning tasks and pronouncing some of them as biased, psychologists rely on independent theoretical considerations that provide a *gold standard*, such as, the rules of probability theory (58-59; see also Tversky & Kahneman 1973). Unlike in psychology, a parallel gold standard to assess folk intuitive judgements is not available in epistemology. To be fair, Gerken is well aware of this limitation and briefly acknowledges it on page 91. His reply, restated briefly in the Coda (293), is that theoretical considerations from epistemology, *when combined* with independent empirical considerations, can provide “strong reasons” (59) to reject some patterns of intuitive judgements. In this manner, a standard to assess folk epistemology can be worked out in a constructive, equilibristic manner. The remaining worry is that many epistemological principles and arguments used in this process, including those concerning whether circumstances are normal and whether an alternative is epistemically relevant, are precisely what is debatable. In this respect, the standard to assess folk epistemology seems to be quite different from the gold standard used to assess folk psychology. Perhaps this worry could be lessened, once we realize that the relation between epistemology and folk epistemology is far closer than the one between folk psychology and, say, the rules of the probability theory. Occasionally the book leaves the reader with an impression of there being a sharp divide between the two. But it is part of Gerken’s approach that in many cases folk judgements can be useful for theoretical purposes.

Indeed, Gerken does not subscribe to the general skepticism of some experimental philosophers about the evidential value of intuitive judgements, where judgements made in

prominent philosophical cases are argued to be unreliable because they tend to vary with demographic and presentational factors (e.g. Machery, 2017). Gerken observes that, even when stable, patterns of intuitive judgements may reflect a bias for which we would need an independent explanation. On his account the standard for appealing to intuitive judgements is raised, in any case. Gerken's reply to the puzzling patterns of intuitive judgements seems to be premised on the assumption that they are relatively uniform and stable. Indeed, this is what we should expect if such judgments, as argued in the book, are an expression of humans' folk epistemology. At this point, it might be worth discussing a hypothetical alternative picture, where folk epistemology does not produce stable patterns of judgements and can perhaps vary across groups that favour different epistemic values. This issue is mentioned in footnote 10 (15-16), where Gerken says that were such differences to be found, they would only strengthen his point against the straightforward methodology. But interestingly, the lack of uniformity might deepen the gap between folk epistemology and folk psychology. Relatedly, the stability of folk epistemology is up for discussion, once we observe that our epistemic practices can change across time and be infiltrated by means and technologies with which we share information, e.g. traditional vs social media. In this respect, folk epistemology might be interestingly different from other folk theories we rely on.

On Folk Epistemology is a rich, carefully argued book that not only makes important contributions to several prominent epistemological debates, but also, and perhaps most importantly, opens up for a new exciting field of research where the relation between epistemology and our epistemic practices can be further investigated.

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