

# Knowledge and the Many Norms on Action

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**Abstract** On an impurist approach to epistemology, whether a person knows that  $p$  can vary with normative facts about her actions—including facts that do not bear on whether  $p$  is true. This paper presents a challenge to impurists: they must specify *which* of the many norms on action are distinctively connected to knowledge, and they must explain why. To the extent that contemporary impurists address this challenge, they do so by citing norms of ‘practical rationality.’ I show that, on any theory of practical rationality, this approach leads to unacceptable results. Contemporary impurists, then, are in trouble. I conclude the paper by sketching three ways that the impurist might attempt to get out of trouble. The most promising of these approaches appeals to the social role played by certain norms on action.

According to a recently popular movement in epistemology, whether a person knows that  $p$  can vary with normative facts about her actions—including facts that do not bear on whether  $p$  is true. Perhaps, for instance, whether a person knows that  $p$  can vary with changes to the facts about how good or bad it would be for her to act on the assumption that  $p$ . I’ll call the commitment to this sort of connection between knowledge and norms on action ‘impurism’.<sup>1</sup> An impurist epistemology can be usefully contrasted with an approach on which only paradigmatically epistemic factors—including, for instance, truth, strength of evidence, and safety from error—can make a difference for knowledge.

This paper presents a challenge: impurists must specify *which* of the many norms on action are distinctively connected to knowledge, and they must explain why.

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<sup>1</sup> I take this term from Fantl and McGrath (2009, 35). On my usage, it’s a matter of definition that the facts about a subject’s circumstances that make a difference to knowledge are concerned with norms on action; on Fantl and McGrath’s usage, this is true, but not a matter of definition.

In section 1, I lay out the challenge in further depth and explain why any acceptable version of impurism must address it. In section 2, I defend two desiderata for a response to the challenge. In section 3, I show that contemporary versions of impurism do not have the tools to offer a response that meets those desiderata. To the extent that contemporary impurists address my challenge, they tend to do so by citing standards of ‘rationality’ (or ‘practical rationality’). No matter how we understand these appeals, they lead to unacceptable results for impurist views.

Having shown that contemporary impurists are in trouble, I spend section 4 discussing ways for them to get out of trouble. One of the primary upshots of this discussion is that impurists should abandon biconditional knowledge-action links of the sort found in Hawthorne and Stanley (2008).

## **1. The Challenge, and Why It Needs Answering**

### **1.1. A Challenge for Impurists**

Let’s begin by getting a feel for impurism. Several prominent defenses of impurism use cases like the following to illustrate their views:

*Low Stakes.* Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit their paychecks. It is not important that they do so, as they have no impending bills. But as they drive past the bank, they notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoons. Hannah remembers the bank being open on Saturday morning a few weeks ago, so she says, ‘Fortunately, it will be open tomorrow, so we can just come back.’ In fact, Hannah is right—the bank will be open on Saturday.

*High Stakes.* Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit their paychecks. Since their mortgage payment is due on Sunday, they have very little in their account, and they are on the brink of foreclosure, it is very important that they deposit their paychecks by Saturday. But as they drive past the bank, they notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoons. Hannah remembers the bank being open on Saturday morning a few weeks ago, so she says, ‘Fortunately, it will be open

tomorrow, so we can just come back.’ In fact, Hannah is right—the bank will be open on Saturday.<sup>2</sup>

Impurism makes room for the possibility that, while Hannah knows that the bank will be open tomorrow in *Low Stakes*, she does not know the bank will be open tomorrow in *High Stakes*. That’s because, if impurism is true, a person’s knowledge can vary with normative facts about her actions. And there is a difference in the normative facts about Hannah’s action across the two cases. In *Low Stakes*, there’s nothing objectionable about the way that Hannah acts, but in *High Stakes*, it seems unacceptable for Hannah to rely on the proposition that the bank will be open tomorrow. Whether it’s acceptable for Hannah to rely on this proposition is just the sort of normative question that an impurist might cite as importantly connected to her knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

(In fact, things are subtler than this. It might be unacceptable for Hannah to rely on a proposition for a host of reasons, some of which have nothing to do with her epistemic position with respect to that proposition. So, on plausible impurist views, only *certain* ways of falling short of a normative standard are importantly connected to knowledge. I’ll set this point aside for now, and discuss it in more detail in section 3.2.)

So far, I’ve merely offered a suggestive sketch of the idea behind impurism. Any fully developed impurism must offer a more precise formulation of the connection between knowledge and norms on action. It’ll be useful to distinguish between two burning questions for impurists who aim to do so.

First: I’ve talked about whether Hannah is in a position to *rely on* the proposition that the bank is open tomorrow. But what does it mean to *rely on* a proposition? Suppose, as impurists claim, that Hannah can know a proposition only when it’s appropriate for that proposition to play some role

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<sup>2</sup> Cases like these were made famous by DeRose (1992, 913); they take a particularly notable role in Stanley (2005). I borrow the formulation in Schroeder (2012, 266-7).

<sup>3</sup> Some impurists will deny that there is a difference in knowledge in these particular cases. Some, for instance, might resist the suggestion that Hannah’s memory is knowledge-level evidence in *Low Stakes*. Others will resist the notion that a person could gain or lose knowledge solely in virtue of moving from one choice scenario to another. (See, e.g., Ross and Schroeder 2014 and Locke 2017—for an extended discussion, see Schroeder 2018).

in her action. Well, then: what is that role? There has been a great deal of writing on this topic, and impurists suggest many different candidate roles. Fantl and McGrath (2009, 66), for instance, call attention to the question of whether a proposition can play a *justifying* role. Hawthorne and Stanley, by contrast, focus on whether “it is appropriate to treat the proposition... as a reason for acting” (2008, 578). Other precisifications abound.<sup>4</sup> Since the challenge that I offer afflicts all versions of impurism, I won’t say more about this first question. In what follows, I’ll grant that the impurist can successfully answer it, and I’ll use talk of *relying on a proposition* as a theory-neutral placeholder for the best answer.

My challenge concerns a second question about how to flesh out impurism: what does it mean for a person’s relying on a proposition to be *acceptable*? There are many normative standards against which behavior can be measured, and therefore many ways to answer this question. The impurist might say that Hannah can know that the bank will be open tomorrow only if it would be acceptable, *morally* speaking, for her to rely on that proposition. Or only if it would be acceptable, *prudentially* speaking. Or only if it would be acceptably *polite*. The list goes on. Which of these assessments of action make a difference for knowledge, and why?

I’ve now posed my challenge to impurists: they must say which norms on action are distinctively connected to knowledge, and they must explain why. In the remainder of this section, I’ll explain why impurists owe us a response.

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<sup>4</sup> Fantl and McGrath (2002, 77) focus on whether an agent is “rational to prefer as if *p*”; in their (2007, 559), they instead foreground the condition of being “rational to act as if *p*.” Two other examples: Ross and Schroeder (2014, 272) ask whether it is acceptable to “treat *p* as true in [one’s] reasoning”, and Locke (2014, 43; cf. Hawthorne 2004, 30) draws attention to whether it is acceptable to “premise” a proposition in the situations where one is disposed to do so.

## 1.2 Why the Challenge Needs Answering

Why must the impurist address my challenge? In short, because without the right answer, the impurist's theory will have unacceptable results. This section surveys two such results: outright contradiction and unacceptably skeptical verdicts.

First, consider the threat of outright contradiction. This threat is particularly pressing for impurists, like John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley, who posit a *biconditional* link between knowledge and action. According to Hawthorne and Stanley,

Where one's choice is p-dependent, it is appropriate to treat the proposition that *p* as a reason for acting iff you know that *p*. (2008, 578)

The trouble for this biconditional claim is that, in some cases, it is appropriate according to one norm, but inappropriate according to another, to treat the very same proposition as a reason for acting. To see this, consider a variation on the *High Stakes* cases above:

*Naomi's Medical Supplies* It is Friday afternoon, and Naomi is heading home from work. Her boss has asked her to put a bag of medical supplies in the mail by Saturday. She knows that, unless the medical supplies are in the mail by Saturday, five innocents who need treatment will die. But Naomi is radically morally apathetic: it does not matter to her whether the innocents live or die. Naomi sees that there is a long line at the only post office where she can put the supplies in the mail. If she waits in line, it will make her late to a dinner party that does matter a great deal to her. Remembering that the post office was open on Saturday a few weeks ago, Naomi decides to pass the post office by and to come back tomorrow to put the supplies in the mail.

Suppose that, when she passes the post office by, Naomi treats the proposition *that it will be open tomorrow* as a reason for action. Is it acceptable for her to do so?

Well, some norms surely call her behavior unacceptable. For instance, Naomi's action seems to violate *moral* norms, and perhaps also *all-things-considered* norms, on action. Given the weakness of her evidence that the post office will be open tomorrow, it's unacceptable for Naomi to rely on that proposition. The claim that it's (morally) unacceptable for Naomi to rely on the proposition that the post office will be open tomorrow, in conjunction with Hawthorne and Stanley's biconditional knowledge-action link, entails that she does not know that the post office will be open tomorrow.

On the other hand, some norms call Naomi's behavior acceptable. Though it's quite clear that Naomi's behavior violates moral standards, it's far less clear that there's anything *imprudent* or *irrational* about her action. Another way of putting the point: although the *moral* stakes in this case are high, the *prudential* stakes (and perhaps also the *rational* stakes) are low. The claim that Naomi's pattern of practical reasoning is (prudentially) acceptable, in conjunction with Hawthorne and Stanley's biconditional, entails that she knows that the post office will be open tomorrow.

We've reached a contradictory result: Naomi both knows and doesn't know that the post office will be open tomorrow. And it's clear what must be done to avoid this result: impurists like Hawthorne and Stanley must get more specific about the norm on action operative in their biconditional knowledge-action links.

Now, not all impurists defend biconditional knowledge-action links. Some defend the weaker claim that knowledge is a sufficient, but not a necessary, condition on acceptable action. Take, for example, a principle defended by Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath:

If you know that  $p$ , then  $p$  is warranted enough to justify you in  $\phi$ -ing, for any  $\phi$ . (2009, 66)

This principle does not run the risk of licensing contradiction in the same way that a biconditional one does. Although one can apply *modus tollens* to Fantl and McGrath's principle to determine that an agent lacks knowledge, it cannot be similarly used to show that an agent has knowledge.

Defenders of principles like Fantl and McGrath's, however, are still obliged to answer my challenge about the many norms on action. Unless they do so, they run the risk of unacceptably skeptical results. Why? Well, simply put, there are a great many norms on action, including merely stipulated ones. If one must be able to act acceptably according to *every* norm in order to have knowledge, knowledge will be rare indeed.

To see this point, consider a further case:

*Kayla's Shirt* Kayla is deciding whether to do laundry for tomorrow. She decides not to, on the grounds that she (somewhat vaguely) remembers seeing a clean white shirt in her dresser two days ago. Unbeknownst to her, there is a club on the other side of

the globe called the Clean White Shirt Group. According to the bylaws of the club, everyone must always have a clean white shirt in his or her dresser. The group's rules explicitly state that, whenever someone is not rationally certain that there is a clean white shirt in her dresser, that proposition is insufficiently warranted to justify her in acting. As a matter of fact, Kayla does have a clean white shirt in her dresser.

Kayla's evidence that there is a clean white shirt in her dresser is fairly strong, but it is not strong enough, according to the bylaws of the Clean White Shirt Group, for that proposition to justify her actions.<sup>5</sup> So, if knowledge that  $p$  entails that relying on  $p$  will be acceptable even according to merely stipulated norms like the bylaws of the Clean White Shirt Group, Kayla cannot know that there is a clean white shirt in her dresser. This is absurd.

Moreover, this threat seems to generalize; for almost any item of ordinary knowledge held on the basis of a non-maximally-strong epistemic position, we can cook up a set of norms that threaten that knowledge. Unless the defender of impurism ensures that the ability to meet standards like these is not required for knowledge, her view will have inappropriately skeptical results.<sup>6</sup>

We've now seen why impurists must be specific about the norms on action that are distinctively connected to knowledge. In the next section, I'll defend two desiderata for any answer to this challenge.

## 2. Desiderata

First, impurists should offer an account on which knowledge is sensitive to norms of practical coherence.

Before defending this desideratum, I'll say a bit about the norms I mean to pick out with the term 'practical coherence.' These are, roughly, norms that evaluate whether one pursues one's final

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<sup>5</sup> Suppose, for any given way of precisifying 'rely on,' the bylaws of the Clean White Shirt Group forbid Kayla to rely on the proposition that there is a clean white shirt in her dresser, and that they do because of the weakness of her epistemic position.

<sup>6</sup> You might think that the norms of the Clean White Shirt Group cannot threaten knowledge simply because the group does not exist. But even if such a group arose tomorrow, I could still know about the clean white shirt in my dresser. Indeed, even if the group is passing out fliers on my street, it's plausible that they do not threaten my knowledge of the shirts in my dresser.

ends sensibly, regardless of which final ends one has. To the extent that an agent adheres to these norms, the mental states involved in her action cohere with one another. Her plans and her actions make sense given her goals, her desires, and her credences. She takes (what, on her evidence, are) the necessary means to her most important goals. She takes the actions that she intends. But, importantly, an agent cannot violate these norms *merely* in virtue of having any particular intention or desire.

The following variant on a *High Stakes* case will help to show why impurists should connect practical coherence to knowledge.

*Tracy's Cigarettes* Tracy has a standing intention not to run out of Wolverines, a particularly dangerous and addictive brand of cigarettes. This is her most firmly held, most devout intention, and she fully endorses it. In terms of the overall success of her current plans and goals, running out of Wolverines constitutes the maximally disastrous scenario.

On her way home from work on Saturday, Tracy passes the only drugstore that sells Wolverines. She knows that, if she does not buy more Wolverines by the end of the day tomorrow, she will run out. She sees that there is a long line at the drugstore. Remembering that the drugstore was open on Sunday a few weeks ago, she decides to pass the store by and to come back tomorrow to buy Wolverines.

We can suppose that, in this case, replenishing Tracy's stock of Wolverines would be bad for her well-being. We can even suppose that she knows this. This alone does not mean that Tracy has fallen short of the norms of practical coherence; she only falls short of the norms of practical coherence insofar as her plan to buy Wolverines fails to cohere with other plans or desires, or she fails to go about buying her cigarettes in a sensible way.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the case as described seems to involve a failure of practical coherence. To see this, note that a friend might challenge Tracy's behavior by asking, "why are you passing the drugstore by? Given how important it is to you to get those cigarettes, shouldn't you just wait in line?" And Tracy might respond by attributing knowledge to herself. She might answer, for instance, "what's

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<sup>7</sup> You might worry that any plan that is knowably imprudent must involve practical incoherence, and so that the case as presented is impossible. For more on this worry, see section 3.2.



all the fuss? I know that the store will be open tomorrow, so my decision to come back then is totally sensible.”

Importantly, this is just the sort of exchange commonly cited by defenders of impurism to illustrate and to defend their view.<sup>8</sup> Knowledge, according to many impurists, puts a person beyond the reach of some (although, importantly, not all) sorts of criticism. And it’s very plausible that, if Tracy were to use a knowledge-attribution to portray her action as beyond the reach of her friend’s criticism, she would be aiming to avoid criticism *in terms of practical coherence*. After all, Tracy acknowledges that her plan is imprudent. So the question of whether she has enough evidence to act *prudently* is not at issue between her and her friend. The question at issue, rather, is whether she has enough evidence for her actions and intentions to cohere with her evidence. Insofar as impurists take our practices of knowledge-attribution at face value, then, they have reason to suppose that knowledge is sensitive to the norms of practical coherence.

The foregoing remarks give some support to the notion that impurists should accept our first desideratum. And we don’t have to look far for further support. Impurists frequently offer arguments that are easiest to read as attempts to establish connections between knowledge and practical coherence. Many of the most influential arguments for impurism, for instance, explicitly claim that they are evaluating subjects’ actions within a decision-theoretic model.<sup>9</sup> It’s easiest to read this language as aimed at picking out norms that do not evaluate a subject’s final ends. Moreover, these arguments often draw on examples that are entirely neutral regarding the value of subjects’ final ends. Take two examples: Fantl and McGrath (2009, 48-9) discuss an agent who aims to make it to Foxboro on time, and Hawthorne and Stanley (2008, 571) discuss agents who aim to find their way to a restaurant. The plausibility of these examples does not hinge on whether the agents’ aims are

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Hawthorne and Stanley (2008, 571-2); Fantl and McGrath (2007, 561-4; 2009, 60).

<sup>9</sup> Hawthorne and Stanley (2008, 583); Fantl and McGrath (2002, 75); Fantl and McGrath (2009, 76); Locke (2014, 47-50).

worthwhile; they serve, rather, to bring out the question of whether the agents are pursuing their aims in a sensible way.

Arguments in favor of impurism, then, are frequently executed in terms that suggest a focus on practical coherence. Moreover, they are no less plausible when understood as picking out norms of practical coherence. Insofar as the current literature gives us reason to think that impurism is true, we have reason to think there are connections between knowledge and practical coherence.

Second, impurists should offer an account on which knowledge is sensitive to the norms of morality.

To see why this desideratum cannot be reduced to the first, return to the case of morally apathetic Naomi, who is responsible for mailing lifesaving medical supplies to five innocents. Naomi's decision to pass the post office by makes her liable to criticism: she is objectionably running risks. Further, this criticism does not seem concerned with the worry that Naomi is practically incoherent. Since she is morally apathetic, we can grant that she is being perfectly coherent. So, if Naomi's case is fit to illustrate the sort of normative flaw that rules out knowledge, the norms that make a difference for knowledge are not exhausted by norms of practical coherence.

This raises an important question: does Naomi's case illustrate the sort of flaw that rules out knowledge? Defenders of *moral encroachment* in epistemology, including Pace (2011), Fritz (2017), Moss (2018), and Basu and Schroeder (2019), will answer in the affirmative. And, as I've argued in other work, even impurists who do not explicitly flag their commitment to moral encroachment have good reason, by their own lights, to endorse it. In my (2017), I show that, insofar as extant arguments for impurism are successful, they can be adapted with no loss of plausibility to establish connections between knowledge and moral norms in particular. It would take too long to recap the argument of that paper here, but I'll offer a few reflections to highlight my conclusion's plausibility.

Recall that traditional defenses of impurism frequently note that knowledge-attributions can be used to support normative claims about action. Our practice of attributing knowledge, impurists

argue, is connected to our evaluation of action; by claiming that an agent knows, we can thereby portray her action as acceptable or defend it against certain sorts of criticism. But the connections between knowledge-attribution and *moral* evaluation seem just as strong as the connections between knowledge-attribution and other evaluations of action. To return to our example: imagine that morally-apathetic Naomi has a conversation with a friend who acknowledges her moral apathy. The friend might ask Naomi, “isn’t it awfully risky for you to pass the post office like this?” And Naomi might seek to defend her action by insisting, “there’s no risk; I *do* know it will be open.” The question at issue between these two cannot be the question of whether Naomi is behaving *coherently*—rather, the question seems to concern the *moral* status of Naomi’s action.

In other work, I’ve drawn on observations like these to argue that facts about what matters *morally* are at least as apt to make a difference to knowledge as are facts about what matters *to the knower*. So, insofar as we have good reason to accept impurism, we have good reason to accept connections between knowledge and moral norms. Those connections are, therefore, a desideratum for any impurist.

### **3. Appeals to Practical Rationality**

I’ve now articulated a challenge to impurists, and I’ve argued for two desiderata for any response. This section shows that, insofar as actual impurists address the challenge I’ve raised, they fail to meet our desiderata.

To the extent that impurists refer to particular bodies of norms on action, they tend to simply cite ‘rationality’ or ‘practical rationality.’<sup>10</sup> But, on any plausible theory of practical rationality, connections between knowledge and practical rationality do not suffice to meet both of our

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<sup>10</sup> The language of ‘rationality’ or ‘practical rationality’ predominates, for instance, in Stanley (2005), Weatherston (2005), Fantl and McGrath (2002; 2007), Hawthorne and Stanley (2008), Ross and Schroeder (2014), and Locke (2015).

desiderata in a satisfying way. In this section, I'll survey three approaches to practical rationality, and I'll show why none of these approaches allows the impurist to avoid trouble.

### 3.1 Rationality as Practical Coherence

Some use the term 'practical rationality' to pick out the notion that I've called 'practical coherence.'<sup>11</sup> On this picture, an agent is practically rational just to the extent that the mental states involved in her action cohere with one another.

As I noted in section 2, it's plausible that many impurists do have something like practical coherence in mind when they appeal to practical rationality. Section 2 also mentioned the problem with this approach: it fails to establish the right sort of connections between knowledge and *moral* norms. Morally-apathetic Naomi illustrates the issue: if Naomi's epistemic position is sufficiently weak, there is a serious normative problem with her action. But the norms of practical coherence cannot capture this problem. If Naomi is coherently apathetic about whether the medical supplies are mailed tomorrow, her evidence about the post office's hours is simply irrelevant to questions about how to pursue her final ends in a sensible way.

It's worth considering a complication: there are metaethical views on which being practically coherent simply entails following moral norms.<sup>12</sup> If a view of this sort is correct, then I've misdescribed Naomi's case, because anyone who violates a moral norm thereby violates a (perhaps more fundamental) norm of practical coherence. This opens the door to the possibility that, when a friend criticizes Naomi for lacking sufficient evidence, she really means that Naomi lacks sufficient evidence to pass the post office by *while meeting standards of practical coherence*. So if impurists' appeals to practical rationality are to be understood as appeals to norms of practical coherence against the background of this metaethical theory, they may indeed meet both of our desiderata.

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<sup>11</sup> Scanlon (1998, 25-30) and Broome (2007) argue in favor of using 'rationality' to pick out a property closely associated with coherence. Some simply stipulate that they will use 'rationality' in this way; see, for instance, Kolodny (2005, 509-10) and Southwood (2008, 9-10)

<sup>12</sup> Korsgaard (1996, ch. 3) defends such a view.

Now, the impurist has good reason to look beyond this strategy: it would be an unfortunate surprise for impurists if the prospects for their view depended on the truth of a highly controversial, substantive claim in metaethics. But I'll come back to this strategy in section 4. There, I'll sketch three available paths forward for the impurist. One of the three involves taking on a metaethical commitment of just this sort: a commitment to the underlying unity of norms of practical coherence and moral norms. In section 4, I'll suggest that this is not the most promising way forward for the impurist. For now, let's move on to see why two other approaches to practical rationality cannot give the impurist all she needs.

### 3.2 Rationality as Prudence

Perhaps we should interpret impurists' references to norms of rationality as references to norms of *prudence*—that is, norms that prioritize pursuit of self-interest or well-being.

On the plausible assumption that prudential norms sometimes differ from moral norms, this proposal faces the same problem as the previous one. Just as the distinctive normative problem with Naomi's decision seems not to be grounded in practical incoherence, it also seems not to be grounded in imprudence. Just as there is no reason to suppose that the post office's hours matter for the pursuit of Naomi's final ends, there is no reason to suppose that they matter for the pursuit of her well-being. Again, the impurist might retreat to a highly controversial position to solve this problem: she might claim that the norms of morality fall out of the norms of prudence. The impurist who takes this approach gives up a substantial hostage to metaethical fortune. But the impurist who interprets 'practical rationality' as prudence also faces a distinctive second problem—one that will be instructive for our discussion moving forward.

The second problem is this: an impurism that connects knowledge solely to prudence cannot thereby establish the right *sort* of connections between knowledge and practical coherence. Interestingly, this problem arises even if we grant that prudence and practical coherence are tightly

related. Suppose, for instance, that maximal practical coherence and maximal prudence necessarily coincide. In other words, any departure from maximal prudence will be accompanied by some incoherence in the mental states involved in action. You might think that, on this sort of view, connections between knowledge and prudence would automatically establish just the sort of connection between knowledge and coherence that the impurist needs.

But things are more complicated. The case of Tracy's cigarettes will help to illustrate the problem. Although characters like Tracy are imprudent, and they also do lack knowledge, their imprudence is not related to their action in the right way to explain *why* they lack knowledge. To see why, we'll need to take a closer look at the structure of defensible impurist views.

As we saw in sections 1 and 2, impurists generally defend some precisification of the following conditional:

If *S* knows that *p*, then it is acceptable for *S* to rely on *p*.

As it stands, the principle faces serious problems. For one, paradigmatic *reasons of the wrong kind* seem to present counterexamples. Say, for instance, that an evil demon threatens to destroy the world if I rely on the proposition *that I exist* (fill in the details about "relying on" however you like). Surely, in such a case, it would be unacceptable for me to rely on the premise that I exist. It would be *morally* unacceptable for me to do so, it would be *prudentially* unacceptable, and for anyone who has the goal of existing, it would be forbidden by norms of practical coherence. As it stands, then, the principle above suggests that I cannot know that I exist in the face of the demon's threat. But defenders of impurism generally do not want to collapse the distinction between right and wrong kinds of reasons for belief in this way.

Impurists are aware of this issue. To address it, they distinguish between sources of normative problems with a person's action. Fantl and McGrath, for instance, offer the following precisification of the principle above:

When you know a proposition  $p$ , no weaknesses in your epistemic position with respect to  $p$ ... stand in the way of  $p$  justifying you. (2009, 64)

This more sophisticated formulation helps to address the case of the demon's threat. Even if the demon's threat makes it the case that, *ultima facie*, the proposition that I exist does not justify me (in believing some further proposition, acting in a certain way, etc.), it is not my *epistemic position* that stands in the way of my being justified. Now, Fantl and McGrath's approach is only one of many available strategies for the impurist. The key point is that any viable impurism must rule out knowledge only in response to certain normative problems—ones associated with the agent's epistemic position.

Now, return to Tracy's case. There is a sense in which Tracy is unable to pass the drugstore while meeting the norms of prudence: her plan to get more Wolverines is an imprudent one, and as long as she retains that plan, she cannot fully meet norms of prudence. But, as we've just seen, impurists must take care *only* to rule out knowledge that  $p$  when a problem with action is associated with the agent's epistemic position with respect to  $p$ . And the imprudence of Tracy's plan to get more Wolverines has nothing to do with her epistemic position regarding the drugstore. To make this clear, we can stipulate that Tracy formed the plan to get more Wolverines before she had any idea about where she might get them. So, even if we grant that Tracy's imprudent plan necessarily carries incoherence with it, prudence is the wrong norm to explain the particular incoherence that comes from the way that she treats her evidence about the drugstore. To explain why her action falls short *in the right way to make a difference for knowledge*, then, the impurist must appeal directly to practical coherence.

So mere appeals to prudence do not allow impurists to satisfy our desiderata. Let's turn to a third way of understanding appeals to 'practical rationality.'

### 3.3 Rationality as Reasons-Responsiveness

On a third approach to practical rationality, to be practically rational is to respond to one's reasons when planning and acting.<sup>13</sup> This approach also fails to give the impurist a way to meet our desiderata.

Just what does it take for a person to respond to her reasons? Say that my prudential reasons speak in favor of staying home, but my moral reasons speak in favor of going out. In this case, there is a sense in which I will inevitably fail to respond to some of my reasons. But it seems wrong to say that, in a case like this, I will inevitably fall short of practical rationality. To avoid this result, a defender of the reasons-responsiveness approach can say that practical rationality is a matter of responding to the *balance*, or *correct weighting*, of one's reasons.<sup>14</sup>

Suppose that the impurist connects knowledge to this sort of reasons-responsiveness; she claims that knowledge that *p* requires the ability to rely on *p* in a way that respects the balance of one's reasons. At first, this approach may seem promising. After all, the primary problem I've cited for other understandings of 'practical rationality' has been the inability to account for connections between knowledge and morality. But it's very plausible that, in many (perhaps all) cases, morality provides us with decisive reasons for action. So practical rationality, understood as reasons-responsiveness, may be violated in all the cases in which morality makes a difference for knowledge. Unfortunately, this approach does not make room for our other desideratum: connections between knowledge and practical coherence. The problem is clearest in cases like Tracy's. When Tracy passes the drugstore on too little evidence, she is open to a particular sort of criticism—a criticism that, I've argued, the impurist should consider relevant for knowledge. But this criticism cannot be straightforwardly put in terms of her failure to respond to the balance of her reasons. The relevant problem with Tracy's action, loosely speaking, is that she is not cautious enough. But her reasons for action do not (on balance) speak in favor of cautiously getting more cigarettes; they speak in favor of

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<sup>13</sup> For two recent defenses, see Kiesewetter (2017) and Lord (2018).

<sup>14</sup> Or, better yet, responding to the balance of one's *possessed* or *available* reasons (see Lord 2018 and Kiesewetter 2017 respectively). I'll set this complication aside.



kicking the habit altogether. So the reasons-responsiveness account of practical rationality seems unable to provide the right sort of normative criticism for agents like Tracy.

But perhaps this is too quick. Although, on the face of it, norms of practical coherence are remarkably different from the norm of reasons-responsiveness, perhaps there are subtle connections between the two. If so, the impurist may seem to have the key to defusing my challenge: she will have an account on which a single sort of normativity—reasons-responsiveness—absorbs norms of practical coherence and norms of morality alike.

On closer inspection, however, things are not so simple. Even if norms of coherence are connected to reasons, they are not connected to reasons for action in the way that the impurist needs. It's worth taking a closer look to see why.

For clarity's sake, I'll limit my discussion to one norm of coherence: the norm that one intend (what one believes to be) the necessary means to one's intended ends. What is the connection between this norm and reasons? Perhaps the connection is straightforward: whenever one intends an end, one thereby obtains a reason to intend the necessary means. Many are suspicious of this approach, on the grounds that it licenses objectionable bootstrapping. Say, for instance, that I have no reason to go to City Hall. Then I take a pill that brings me to (coherently) intend to lie face-down in the middle of City Hall. Going to City Hall is a necessary means to lying face-down there. So, on the current proposal, taking the pill generates a reason to go to City Hall. Many find this result unacceptable.<sup>15</sup>

On another proposal, one does not always have a reason to take the necessary means simply because one intends the ends. Rather, one always has a reason to be such that, if one intends the ends, one intends the necessary means.<sup>16</sup> In other words, one always has a reason to *avoid means-ends*

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<sup>15</sup> See Bratman (1987) and Broome (1999). For a response, see Schroeder (2005).

<sup>16</sup> Note a related proposal: one ought to be such that (when one intends the end, one also intends the necessary means. This is sometimes called a "wide-scope" approach, since it suggests that 'ought' is a propositional operator that takes scope over a conditional. Defenders include Broome (1999), Hill (1973), Gensler (1985), and Wallace (2001).

*incoherence*. This proposal avoids the bootstrapping problem, but it faces problems of its own.<sup>17</sup> One of the most notable, powerfully posed by Niko Kolodny (2005, 542-7; cf. 2008, 374-82), begins from the observation that mere coherence between mental states does not seem terribly important in its own right. But, on the current proposal, there is *always* a reason that counts in favor of avoiding incoherence.<sup>18</sup> What could that reason be? This question is challenging enough that many reject the proposal that there is a standing reason that counts in favor of coherence.

Does this mean that there is no relationship between practical coherence and reasons? Not necessarily. On a currently popular proposal, even though our reasons do not directly favor coherence, the attitudes best supported by our reasons always (or almost always) cohere with one another. As a result, an agent who responds to his reasons in every way will inevitably be fully coherent. Contraposing: any agent who is not fully coherent must not be responding to his reasons in every way.<sup>19</sup>

To see this proposal at work, return to Tracy's case. Suppose Tracy's reasons favor her giving up the intention to get more Wolverines, and they also favor her passing the drugstore by. As we've already seen, Tracy does *not* adopt both of these mental states. Instead, against the balance of her reasons, she maintains the intention to get more Wolverines. This failure to respond to reasons is accompanied by an incoherence: given her evidence, Tracy's plan to get more Wolverines does not sit well with her risky decision to pass the drugstore by. On the current proposal, this is an entirely general trend. Any time an agent is incoherent, she will have failed, in one way or another, to respond to her reasons.

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<sup>17</sup> Among these problems are problems with asymmetry, which I set aside; for more, see Schroeder (2004, 339-40) and Kolodny (2005, 528-42).

<sup>18</sup> In fact, the problem is worse; on any plausible wide-scope approach, there is an exceptionless *requirement* to avoid incoherence. In other words, rules of practical coherence are *strict* (Broome 1999) or *stringent* (Schroeder 2009, 233). But it's difficult to say what could count against incoherence so powerfully that it generates an exceptionless requirement.

<sup>19</sup> This proposal can be found in Kieseewetter (2017), Kolodny (2005, 2008), and Lord (2018).

Unfortunately, even this approach to rationality cannot help the impurist. Why? Well, recall the impurist proposal that we're currently considering: when an agent knows that  $p$ , she is in a position to rely on  $p$  in a way that responds to reasons. It's clear how this formula rules out knowledge in cases like Naomi's; Naomi has decisive reasons, of a moral sort, to be more cautious. It's much less clear, on the other hand, that the formula establishes the right sort of connection between knowledge and practical coherence. Is Tracy in a position to rely, in a way that responds to reasons, on the proposition that the drugstore will be open tomorrow? Well, in one sense, she is not. On the view we're currently considering, whenever Tracy acts in a way that betrays practical incoherence, there will be a failure to respond to reasons somewhere in her psychology.

As we saw in section 3.2, however, this is not the right sort of failure to rule out the possibility that Tracy has knowledge. The mere fact that *something* about an agent puts her in violation of a norm on action cannot be enough to rule out knowledge. Rather, a viable impurism must rule out knowledge of  $p$  *only* when the normative problem with an agent's action arises from the weakness of her epistemic position with respect to  $p$ . But it is the fact that Tracy intends to get more Wolverines *at all* that stands in the way of her responding to reasons. And the problem with this intention, presumably, does not arise in virtue of the weakness of her epistemic position about the drugstore. So Tracy does not fail to respond to reasons *in the right way* to preclude knowledge.

Taking stock: we've now seen that impurists cannot account for the connection between knowledge and practical coherence simply by alluding to norms of reasons-responsiveness. This approach to practical rationality, like the other two we've considered, did not provide an attractive way for the impurist to meet our two desiderata.

Nevertheless, the discussion in this section might seem to point the way toward a more promising strategy for the impurist. That discussion suggested that moral norms and norms of practical coherence both have the following trait:

**Trait T** any violation of the norm by any agent is accompanied, somewhere in the agent's psychology, by a failure to respond to reasons

Here is a candidate attempt to meet my challenge on behalf of the impurist: when one knows that *p*, one is in a position to rely on *p* in a way that meets *each of several* normative standards—specifically, all and only those standards that have trait T.

Note two things about this proposal. First, it departs dramatically from contemporary impurists' actual proposals. Contemporary impurists write as if there is a single master norm on action—the norm of *practical rationality*—and, when one knows that *p*, one's epistemic position with respect to *p* does not stand in the way of one's meeting that norm. The proposal on the table makes progress toward meeting my desiderata precisely by rejecting that assumption.

Second, even if this proposal is extensionally adequate, it seems inadequately illuminating. Why think that norm-violations are particularly worthy of theoretical attention—or particularly apt to make a difference within epistemology—when the norm in question has trait T? On the face of it, the fact that I have violated a norm that has trait T is not interesting in itself; at most, it provides evidence that something with genuine theoretical importance has happened somewhere in my mind. In the next section, I'll sharpen this charge, and I'll say a bit about some more promising ways forward for the impurist.

#### **4. Ways Forward for Impurism**

In section 1, I posed a challenge to impurists: they must specify just which norms on action are distinctively connected to knowledge. To the extent that contemporary impurists address this challenge, they do so by naming norms of practical rationality alone. We've now seen why this strategy is inadequate: on any theory of practical rationality, it fails to appropriately cover both moral norms and norms of practical coherence.

Of course, the fact that existing impurist views fail to meet my challenge doesn't mean that no impurist view possibly could. Is there a way forward for impurists? I begin this final section by

making a proposal about the best format for an impurist view that meets my challenge. But adopting this format, I'll note, is only half the battle for the impurist; the impurist must also explain *why* some norms are connected to knowledge while others are not. I close the paper by surveying three strategies the impurist might adopt to meet this explanatory challenge.

#### 4.1 The Best Format for an Impurist Response

In order to meet the challenge I've set, impurists should abandon biconditional knowledge-action connections of the following form:

Where one's choice is *p*-dependent, it is appropriate to treat the proposition that *p* as a reason for acting iff you know that *p*. (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, 578)

The problem for this principle is simple. It suggests that there is a single sense of "appropriate" on which my ability to appropriately treat *p* as a reason for acting covaries perfectly with my knowledge that *p*. But, as we've seen, the impurist should hold that some people are precluded from knowing by *moral* problems with relying on a proposition, and others are precluded from knowing by problems with the *coherence* of relying on a proposition. Moreover, it's very plausible that these problems are not coextensive: sometimes, one's epistemic position makes it problematic by moral standards, but not problematic by standards of practical coherence, to rely on a proposition. Whatever reading we give to "appropriate," then, it will not pick out all the normative violations that it should.<sup>20</sup>

To avoid this problem, the impurist should instead embrace a view on which knowledge entails, but is not entailed by, avoidance of certain normative criticisms of action. She should, in other words, embrace several principles of the following form:

If S knows that *p*, then S's epistemic position with respect to *p* does not stand in the way of her relying on *p* in a way that meets the standards of morality.

If S knows that *p*, then S's epistemic position with respect to *p* does not stand in the way of her relying on *p* in a way that meets the standards of practical coherence.

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<sup>20</sup> To avoid this result, the impurist could replace "appropriate" with "appropriate according to each of a variety of distinct standards." But this loses the sense of the original proposal and turns it into shorthand for the alternative that I go on to discuss.

This list of necessary conditions might continue; perhaps, for instance, norms of prudence also place a separate constraint on knowledge.

A caveat: *if* following the norms of practical coherence entails following all moral norms (a possibility I noted in section 3.1), then there is no possibility of tension between these two norms. On this picture of the relationship between morality and coherence, Hawthorne and Stanley's biconditional principle can be vindicated.

Nevertheless, since it can only be made good against the background of a particular metaethical view, impurists would do best to leave Hawthorne and Stanley's principle behind. Although the idea that any immoral agent must be incoherent certainly has defenders, it is highly controversial. Indeed, the burden of proof surely lies with its defenders; on the face of it, it's quite easy to imagine an entirely coherent Caligula.<sup>21</sup> If she adopts a biconditional knowledge-action link, the impurist rests the prospects for her view on the impossibility of such a figure. She concedes that her epistemological program can only be made good if a second ambitious program, in metaethics, is also successful. If possible, the impurist should not make this concession.

Suppose, then, that the impurist embraces multiple distinct necessary conditions on knowledge, each of which is associated with a different flavor of normativity. This is the most appealing format for a response to my challenge, but it is only half the battle; the impurist should also explain *why* these necessary conditions exist while others do not. Why does knowledge preclude the possibility of certain *moral* criticisms (namely, ones that have to do with the weakness of one's epistemic position) but not the possibility of analogous criticisms *in terms of the norms of the Clean White Shirt Group*?

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<sup>21</sup> This case is from Gibbard (1999, 145).

## 4.2 Three Strategies

In this final subsection, I'll sketch three strategies that the impurist could use to explain why some norms on action, but not others, are distinctively connected to knowledge.

**Brute List:** On this first approach, the impurist offers a list of norms that are distinctively connected to knowledge, and calls it a brute fact—one that stands in no need of further explanation—that each norm has that distinctive connection.

It may be that this is the best that the impurist can do. And, of course, all explanations have to stop at some point. But it would be doubly unfortunate if the impurist could not say anything informative to distinguish the norms that matter for knowledge from the norms that don't. For one, this leaves a troubling lack of unification in her picture of epistemology. But, even more troublingly, the brute list approach may undercut the motivation for adopting impurism in the first place.

To see this, recall one of the major sources of evidence for impurism: many impurists are impressed by the fact that we can use knowledge-attributions to make claims about the normative status of actions. Naomi, for instance, can deflect certain moral criticisms of her choice to pass the post office by saying, "I know that it'll be open tomorrow," and Tracy can portray her choice to pass the drugstore by as coherent by making the same claim.

It's striking that this point about knowledge-discourse seems to generalize beyond norms of practical coherence and moral norms. To see this, return to the example of the Clean White Shirt Group. Suppose that Kayla is confronted by an adherent of that group, who accuses her of failing to check her dresser on insufficient evidence. Kayla, like Naomi and Tracy, can defend her action with a knowledge-claim: she can say "I know that I have a clean white shirt in my dresser." We appear to have just the same sort of evidence for a link between knowledge and merely stipulated rules that we have for a link between knowledge and practical coherence.

The problem here is a serious one, and it has not gone unnoticed by opponents of impurism.<sup>22</sup> If our knowledge-discourse is flexible in a way that can successfully convey information about any salient standard at all, evidence from everyday usage may fit best not with impurism but with purist contextualism. So, unless she can provide a compelling, illuminating account of the difference between Kayla's situation and *Bank High Stakes*, the impurist stands open to the charge that some of the apparent evidence in favor of her view is actually no evidence at all.<sup>23</sup>

So providing a principled, attractive story about the difference between norms on action is not merely a way for the impurist to flesh out the details her view. It is also a vital step in explaining why her view is genuinely well-motivated. As a result, impurists would do best to avoid the brute-list approach.

**Metaethical Unity:** On this second approach, the impurist claims that norms of morality and norms of practical coherence both make a difference for knowledge precisely because both are *genuinely normative* in just the same sense. Merely stipulated norms, by contrast, do not make a difference for knowledge precisely because they are not genuinely normative. Note that this proposal can be made with or without the claim that being practically coherent requires being moral.

The appeal of this approach is clear—intuitively, norms of practical coherence and norms of morality both *matter* in a way that merely stipulated norms do not. But there is also a problem with this approach: namely, there are good reasons to worry that moral norms and norms of coherence are not, in fact, genuinely normative in just the same sense.

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<sup>22</sup> DeRose (2009, ch. 7) presses a related worry.

<sup>23</sup> [Name] has suggested that there is a principled way of taking up this challenge by discarding my second desideratum. On this proposal, knowledge-discourse that aims to evaluate *coherence* differs from other knowledge-discourse that aims at evaluation because, in the former case alone, the subject of the knowledge-attributions is *committed* to caring about whether she meets epistemic standards. But note that the following, parallel proposal seems like an equally good impurist response: knowledge-discourse that aims to evaluate *responsiveness to genuine reasons* is different from all other sorts of knowledge-discourse that aims at evaluation because, in the former case alone, it's *genuinely important* for the subject to meet certain epistemic standards. As I showed above, impurists' references to 'practical rationality' can be understood in a way that privileges either of these proposals. So there is no more reason to think that the impurist should give up on my second desideratum than there is to think that she should give up on my first.



Section 3.3 showcased some reasons for doubting that the connection between practical coherence and *genuine normativity* is straightforward. Many doubt that, merely by adopting a mental state, one obtains a genuinely normative reason to make one's other mental states cohere with it. Many also doubt that there is any standing genuinely normative reason to keep one's mental states coherent. And weaker connections between genuinely normative reasons and coherence—recall trait T—do not seem to capture the distinctive importance of practical coherence norms. In the end, it seems likely that morality and practical coherence both make special and important claims on us, but that their claims on us are important in different ways. Perhaps, for instance, morality is special because it provides us with *robustly normative* reasons,<sup>24</sup> or *authoritative* reasons,<sup>25</sup> and practical coherence is special because it is *constitutive of agency*,<sup>26</sup> or because we have *committed* ourselves to it.<sup>27</sup>

Now, maybe these reasons for worry can be assuaged. Just as there is a noteworthy contingent of philosophers who believe that being coherent simply entails being moral, there is also a noteworthy contingent of philosophers who believe that morality and practical coherence exert just the same sort of pull on us. But, just as it would be unfortunate for the impurist to rest the prospects for her view on the controversial position that coherence requires morality, it would also be unfortunate for the impurist to rest the prospects for her view on the controversial position that morality and practical coherence are both genuinely normative in just the same sense.

**Social Role:** On this third strategy, the impurist appeals not to the idea that practical coherence and morality have similar standing *in the normative universe itself*, but instead to the idea that practical coherence and morality play similar roles in some real or idealized social practice.

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<sup>24</sup> McPherson (2011, 233)

<sup>25</sup> Hampton (1998, 85ff)

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Davidson (2004) and Korsgaard (1996).

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Southwood (2008).

This strategy seems more promising than the other two. It's much less ambitious to suggest that morality and practical coherence share a social role than it is to suggest that, for instance, being practically coherent requires being fully moral. And, by taking this approach, the impurist stands to gain a genuinely informative story about the connection between knowledge and action.

For an example of the sort of story that might emerge, consider Edward Craig's account of social role played by the concept of knowledge. Very roughly, Craig (1990) suggests that, by deploying the concept of knowledge, we fill an important social role: we flag (sufficiently) reliable sources of information. This proposal seems to provide an illuminating explanation of the close connections between knowledge and action. Perhaps knowledge is sensitive to moral norms precisely because our shared epistemic discourse stably aims to communicate about whether an informant is reliable enough to help one meet moral standards. Perhaps, by the same token, knowledge is sensitive to norms of practical coherence precisely because our shared epistemic practice stably aims to communicate about whether an informant is reliable enough to help one pursue one's immediate plans (regardless of whether those goals have genuine merit).

Of course, the devil is in the details. Craig's particular story about the role of knowledge-claims is, most likely, not a perfect fit for the impurist who wants to meet my desiderata.<sup>28</sup> Most impurists are concerned to evaluate whether the knower's beliefs have enough support for *her* to rely on them; Craig's proposal, by contrast, most naturally calls attention to the question of whether a knower's beliefs are supported enough for *anyone in her community* to rely on them. But I've referred to Craig here solely by way of illustrative example; surely, there are other productive accounts to be given of our knowledge-discourse. In my view, appeals to the connections between knowledge and norms on action in society provide the most promising way forward for impurists.

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Grimm (2015) draws on Craig to develop an impurism that comes close to meeting my desiderata. But, on his view, a morally apathetic agent can sometimes know that *p* even though the weakness of her epistemic position makes it morally unacceptable for her to rely on *p*. My "Akrasia and Epistemic Impurism" (ms) shows that this is a bad result.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has provided existing impurists with some reasons for pessimism, and with some reasons for optimism. I've shown that existing impurist views are unacceptable, because they fail to approach norms on action with appropriate nuance. But I've also sketched a way forward for impurists. With some additional work, perhaps impurists can explain, in a genuinely illuminating way, why only some of the many norms on action make a difference to knowledge.

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