Pragmatic Encroachment and Moral Encroachment

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**Abstract** Subject-sensitive invariantism posits surprising connections between a person’s knowledge and features of her environment that are not paradigmatically epistemic features. But which features of a person’s environment have this distinctive connection to knowledge? Traditional defenses of subject-sensitive invariantism emphasize features that matter *to the subject* of the knowledge-attribution. Call this *pragmatic encroachment*. A more radical thesis usually goes ignored: knowledge is sensitive to moral facts, whether or not those moral facts matter to the subject. Call this *moral encroachment*. This paper argues that, insofar as there are good arguments for pragmatic encroachment, there are also good arguments for moral encroachment.

This paper is concerned with a recently popular movement in epistemology, one which sometimes goes by the name ‘subject-sensitive invariantism.’ As I’ll be using the term, *subject-sensitive invariantism* applies to any view that accepts the following two theses.

**Invariantism** The truth conditions of knowledge attributions do not vary across contexts of use.

**Subject-Sensitivity** The truth-value of a knowledge attribution depends on features of the attribution’s subject’s environment that are not paradigmatically epistemic features.

Invariantism is most usefully contrasted with *contextualism*, the view that knowledge attributions have different truth conditions in different contexts of use. On a contextualist view, you and I might both attribute knowledge to the same person using the same sentence, and our attributions might still have different truth-conditions. ‘Patricia knows that she owns an SUV’ could be true in my mouth and false in yours, as long as we are in different conversational contexts. On an invariantist view, this cannot happen; as long as we are talking about the same Patricia at the same time, our utterances will be either both true or both false.

Subject-Sensitivity is most usefully contrasted with the claim that only paradigmatically epistemic facts can make a difference to the truth of a knowledge-attribution.[[1]](#footnote-1) Paradigmatically epistemic facts include, for instance, facts about whether a belief is true and whether it is justified. These are facts, as Ichikawa and Steup (2016) note, that have ‘some sort of intimate connection with truth.’ I won’t, in this paper, take a stance on exactly what makes a fact paradigmatically epistemic. The argument below requires only the assumption that two sorts of facts are *not* paradigmatically epistemic: facts about what matters to the subject (like the fact that *it would be in Patricia’s interest to open a 401k*) and moral facts (like the fact *that it is* *morally permissible for Patricia to give money to charity*). This is a fairly weak assumption. Traditional theories of knowledge do not posit systematic connections between knowledge and practical interests or systematic connections between knowledge and morality.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Subject-sensitive invariantism (SSI), then, is the claim that, first, all attributions of knowledge of a given proposition to a given person (at a given time) have the same truth-conditions, and that, second, the truth-values of those attributions depend on features of S’s environment that are not paradigmatically epistemic features.

This paper investigates a crucial question for SSI: *which* features of a subject’s environment that are not paradigmatically epistemic features can make a difference for that subject’s knowledge? Traditional defenders of SSI generally answer this question by citing facts about what matters *to the subject*: in order to bear on S’s knowledge, a feature of her environment must be connected to things that matter *to S* in some way.[[3]](#footnote-3) Call this the thesis of pragmaticencroachment. By contrast, defenders of SSI have tended to ignore a more radical hypothesis: features that matter *morally*, whether or not those features matter to the subject, can affect what a subject knows. Call this the thesis of moral encroachment. In a slogan, then, current defenders of SSI accept *pragmatic* encroachment on knowledge without paying attention to *moral* encroachment on knowledge.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This paper argues for a striking conclusion about SSI: to the extent that arguments for SSI are successful in showing that knowledge is sensitive to practical value, those arguments are equally successful in showing that knowledge is sensitive to moral value. Insofar as there are good arguments for pragmatic encroachment, there are also good arguments for moral encroachment.

1. Practical Normativity and Moral Normativity

This paper focuses on a contrast between two ways in which Subject-Sensitivity could be defended. First, it might be (and usually is) defended through an appeal to pragmatic encroachment. On this first approach, knowledge depends on facts that are not paradigmatically epistemic facts precisely because it depends on facts about what matters *to the subject*. Second, it might be defended through an appeal to moral encroachment. On this second approach, knowledge depends on facts that are not paradigmatically epistemic facts precisely because it depends on facts about what matters *morally speaking.*

I do not claim that the distinction between what matters *to the subject* and what matters *morally speaking* is exhaustive, precise, or maximally illuminating.[[5]](#footnote-5) It’s entirely possible that there are other, more productive ways of distinguishing between sorts of normativity that bear on a subject’s action. The crucial point, for this paper, is that extant arguments for SSI can be adapted to support the claim that knowledge is sensitive to what matters *morally* just as well as they can be used to support the claim that knowledge is sensitive to what matters *to the knower*. Though these arguments are generally used to defend a surprising connection between knowledge and *practical* normativity, they can be adapted to defend an even more surprising connection between knowledge and *moral* normativity.

So just how do extant arguments for SSI work? The most prominent premise in these arguments posits a particular sort of connection between knowledge and action. Let’s call this premise in the arguments for SSI the *knowledge-action link*. Consider the following examples:

If you know that *p*, then *p* is warranted enough to justify you in ϕ‐ing, for any ϕ. (Fantl and McGrath 2009, 66)

If a subject knows that p, then she is in a good enough epistemic position to rely on p in her practical reasoning. (Brown 2008, 245)

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)

It’s worth noting that the final formulation of the knowledge-action link above, from Hawthorne and Stanley, is particularly strong; it posits a *biconditional* connection between knowledge and sufficient warrant for action. Though all knowledge-action links have their critics (e.g. Brown 2008), this biconditional version is particularly controversial.[[6]](#footnote-6) For the purposes of this paper, we can set it aside and focus on the weaker, less controversial version of the knowledge-action link: knowledge is a sufficient condition for epistemically unproblematic action. In what follows, I’ll work with the following formulation:

**Knowledge-Action Link:** If S knows that p, then S is warranted enough to act (believe, prefer) as if p.

Why would anyone accept even this weaker form of the knowledge-action link? I’ll take a moment, now, to briefly mention two of the reasons for which defenders of SSI have found the knowledge-action link attractive.[[7]](#footnote-7)

First, SSI-theorists often note that we defend and encourage action by talking about knowledge. When I judge that you are being too reticent, I can encourage you to act by saying, ‘There’s no need to keep looking for more evidence. You know that it’ll work’ (cf. Fantl and McGrath 2007, 562-3). Likewise, if I want to defend my action from distinctively epistemic criticism, I can do so by insisting that I knew my action would work. This sort of practice suggests that people generally consider knowledge that *p* a sufficient condition on the appropriateness of acting as if *p*.

SSI-theorists also appeal to the close connection between our judgments about knowledge and our judgments about negligence and blame. If you let your child play near a dog, and I accuse you of negligence, you can escape blame by showing me that you know the dog is safe. This pattern of behavior, again, suggests that people tacitly consider knowledge that *p* a sufficient condition on the appropriateness of acting as if *p* (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, 572-3). Several related observations about everyday thought and talk, then, give the knowledge-action link some *prima facie* plausibility.

Now, note that there is a gap between the knowledge-action link and the thesis I’ve called Subject-Sensitivity: the truth-value of an attribution of knowledge to S depend on features of S’s environment that are not paradigmatically epistemic. To reach that conclusion, the defenders of SSI must adopt an additional premise that connects action to features of S’s environment that are not paradigmatically epistemic. Let’s call that premise the *action-environment link*. Here is a rough schema for the typical arguments that use a knowledge-action link and an action-environment link to support Subject-Sensitivity (Cf. Brown 2013, 245):

**Knowledge-Action Link:** If S knows that p, then S is warranted enough to act (believe, prefer) as if p.

**Action-Environment Link:** Feature F of S’s environment (where F is not a paradigmatically epistemic feature of an environment) makes a difference as to whether S is warranted enough to act (believe, prefer) as if p.

Therefore, **Subject-Sensitivity:** The truth-value of a knowledge attribution depends on features of the attribution’s subject’s environment that are not paradigmatically epistemic features.

This paper will make a comparison between two ways of filling out the action-environment link. One, which has been adopted by many prominent defenders of SSI, is the *practical* action-environment link.[[8]](#footnote-8) Adopting this variant of the action-environment link results in the following argument for Subject-Sensitivity:

**Knowledge-Action Link:** If S knows that p, then S is warranted enough to act (believe, prefer) as if p.

**Practical Action-Environment Link:** Facts about what matters *to* *S* (which are not paradigmatically epistemic features of an environment) make a difference as to whether S is warranted enough to act (believe, prefer) as if p.

Therefore, **Subject-Sensitivity:** The truth-value of a knowledge attribution depends on features of the attribution’s subject’s environment that are not paradigmatically epistemic features.

The other variant of the action-environment link that’s relevant for this paper is the *moral* action-environment link. It can be used, in much the same way, to support Subject-Sensitivity:

**Knowledge-Action Link:** If S knows that p, then S is warranted enough to act (believe, prefer) as if p.

**Moral Action-Environment Link:** Facts about what matters *morally* (which are not paradigmatically epistemic features of an environment) make a difference as to whether S is warranted enough to act (believe, prefer) as if p.

Therefore, **Subject-Sensitivity:** The truth-value of a knowledge attribution depends on features of the attribution’s subject’s environment that are not paradigmatically epistemic features.

As these argument-schemas demonstrate, defenders of moral encroachment and pragmatic encroachment alike can accept the knowledge-action link. In fact, as we’ll see in section 4, they can accept the knowledge-action link for just the same reasons. So arguments in favor of the knowledge-action link, though they occupy a great deal of the current literature on SSI, do not favor pragmatic encroachment over moral encroachment

To the contrary, the difference between current arguments for pragmatic encroachment and analogous arguments for moral encroachment lies most importantly in the difference between versions of the action-environment link. So this paper will be primarily concerned with arguments for the practical action-environment link and arguments for the moral action-environment link. Section 2 and section 3 investigate two of the most prominent ways in which defenders of SSI have argued for the practical action-environment link. In each case, I argue that analogous lines of reasoning can be used, with just as much plausibility, to defend the moral action-environment link.

1. The Argument from High-Stakes Gambles

The most explicit support for the practical action-environment link in the current literature comes from Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath. It is an argument about rational action and high-stakes gambles.

The argument from high-stakes gambles starts from the assumption that we know some propositions *fallibly*—that is, we sometimes know that *p* even though there is a non-zero epistemic chance for us that not-*p* (Fantl and McGrath 2009, 11).[[9]](#footnote-9) Suppose, for example, that in everyday, low-stakes contexts, you know the proposition *that Plato taught Aristotle* fallibly. Given the knowledge-action link, this means that you are warranted enough to act as if Plato taught Aristotle. After all, if the knowledge-action link holds, any proposition that you know (fallibly or not) is warranted enough for you to act on it.

Now, suppose that you are presented with a high-stakes gamble: if it is true that Plato taught Aristotle, you get a piece of candy, but if it is false, you get tortured to death. Fantl and McGrath ask, ‘Would it be rational for you to stake your life on the proposition that Plato taught Aristotle? It seems to us it would not’ (2009, 13). This reaction seems plausible enough. Moreover, it seems plausible that this sort of phenomenon generalizes. As long as there is an epistemic chance, however slim, that things will go very badly for you, you can be rationally required to avoid that chance as long as the outcome would be sufficiently bad.

But if this is right, then the mere fact that you are offered a high-stakes gamble about *p* can change whether your belief that *p* is warranted enough to support rational action. We now have an argument for the practical action-environment link: whether you are warranted enough to act on your beliefs depends on the facts about things that matter to you.

Here, briefly, is the argument from high-stakes gambles:

1. Consider some proposition *p* that you know fallibly.[[10]](#footnote-10) In everyday, low-stakes cases, you are warranted enough to act as if *p*.
2. There is some high-stakes gamble as to whether *p* such that you would not be rational to take that high-stakes gamble.
3. (2) is true because, when presented with the high-stakes gamble, you are not epistemically warranted enough with respect to *p* to take the gamble.
4. The only difference between the high-stakes gamble scenario and everyday cases is a difference in the facts about things that matter *to you*—specifically, a difference in the value *to you* of possible outcomes of your available actions.[[11]](#footnote-11)
5. So, **Practical Action-Environment Link**: Facts about what matters to *S* (which are not paradigmatically epistemic features of an environment) make a difference as to whether S is warranted enough to act (believe, prefer) as if p.

Fantl and McGrath do not call attention to (3), but it is a crucial step in this form of argument. It’s worth pausing to see why.

In order to support a viable version of SSI, the action-environment link must be a claim about a particular sort of problem that gets in the way of rational action. The problem must be a distinctively epistemic one: one’s epistemic position with respect to *p* is not strong enough to warrant acting as if *p*. The defender of SSI must take care to tie *only* this sort of rational defect in action to knowledge. Otherwise, she will run the risk of implying, implausibly, that no one can ever act irrationally on the basis of a known proposition. Surely, some people can act irrationally on the basis of knowledge. A person can, for instance, rely on known propositions to act in a way that foreseeably subverts his welfare—say, by buying a horribly addictive drug. The defender of SSI should say that such actions, though rationally defective, are not rationally defective in virtue of the weakness of the subject’s warrant for his beliefs. They are rationally defective because they are based on practically irrational aims.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Fantl and McGrath, then, must be suggesting that the person who takes a (sufficiently) high-stakes gamble is irrational in a distinctively *epistemic* way. By doing so, they can use (1)-(4) to support a version of the practical action-environment link that can interact in the right way with the knowledge-action link.

It will be useful to consider the way that this line of thinking applies to a more realistic case. Consider the following one, from Fantl and McGrath (2007):

… if I find out that the police are (for the first time ever) about to ticket illegally parked cars on my quiet, rural street, my stakes in whether my car is legally parked rise. This makes a difference to whether I’m rational to act as if my car is legally parked, even if my strength of epistemic position doesn’t change..., my belief doesn’t change... , etc. (2007, 560)

The belief that my car is parked legally outside seems like a paradigm case for the sort of belief that, in everyday cases, I am warranted enough to take for granted. But once I am placed in a high-stakes scenario like the one that Fantl and McGrath sketch, my epistemic position is no longer strong enough to warrant me in acting as if my car is parked legally. Indeed, I might need to go check and make sure that the car is parked legally. The defender of SSI uses cases like these as evidence for the practical action-environment link: whether my beliefs are warranted enough to justify depends on the facts about what matters *to me* (in this case, the facts about the value to me of possible outcomes of my available actions).[[13]](#footnote-13)

I’ll now argue that Fantl and McGrath’s line of reasoning can also be used to support an action-environment link that appeals to moral facts. Call the modified argument the *moral* argument from high-stakes gambles:

1. Consider some proposition *p* that you know fallibly. In everyday, low-stakes cases, you are warranted enough to act as if *p*.
2. There is some high-stakes situation in which there would be a moral problem with your acting as if *p*.
3. (7) is true because, in the high-stakes situation, you are not epistemically warranted enough to act as if *p*.
4. The only difference between the high-stakes situation and everyday cases is a difference in the moral facts—specifically, a difference in your moral obligations and permissions.
5. So, **Moral Action-Environment Link**: Facts about what matters *morally* (which are not paradigmatically epistemic features of an environment) make a difference as to whether S is warranted enough to act (believe, prefer) as if p.

To see the appeal of the moral argument from high-stakes gambles, let’s consider a modified version of the example about whether your car is parked legally. Suppose that you do not learn that the police are about to ticket illegally parked cars. You learn, instead, that there is a maniacal traffic officer making his way down your street, and that he is nearly at his wit’s end when it comes to dealing with illegally parked cars. If he sees that your car is parked legally, he will calm down and spend the rest of the night in peace. But if he sees that your car is parked illegally, he will fly into a homicidal rage and kill five innocent people. Luckily, you have the time to go check and make sure that your car is parked legally. In such a case, it would be morally problematic if you failed to go check.[[14]](#footnote-14)

This case illuminates the appeal of premises (6)-(9). It shows, in short, that when you are offered a sufficiently high-stakes *moral* gamble as to whether *p*, *p* can thereby become insufficiently warranted to justify you in acting. Imagine that you stay in your easy chair rather than going to check on your car. There would be something problematic about this behavior.[[15]](#footnote-15) And the problem seems best explained in the following way: if you were to remain in your easy chair, you would be relying on a belief that was insufficiently warranted to make it the case that your action is morally unproblematic. But if this is right, then merely changing the moral facts about your environment can change whether you are warranted enough to act as if *p*. In other words, the moral action-environment link is true.

It’s important to acknowledge a wrinkle in this new line of reasoning. It’s tempting to suppose that, even in this new example where lives hang in the balance, the facts about what matters *to the subject* can adequately explain the difference between permissible action in the ordinary case and in the high-moral-stakes case. After all, most of us care a great deal about protecting human lives where we can easily do so. Protecting others’ lives, in other words, does not simply matter morally; it also usually matters *to us*. If this is right, then perhaps the problem with a person’s warrant in the case offered above can be explained entirely through appeal to pragmatic encroachment.

To see why this approach won’t work, consider a further modification of the case. Imagine a different subject whose car is parked outside. He does care a little bit about whether his car is parked legally, simply because he lightly prefers to follow rules. But he is radically apathetic about other human lives; it does not matter *to him* even a little bit whether any other person lives or dies. In an everyday case, this person can easily know that his car is parked legally. But what about a case where the maniacal traffic officer comes to this person’s street? Well, in this situation, the facts about what matters to him are just the same as the facts about what matters to him in an ordinary, low-moral-stakes case. After all, others’ lives simply do not matter to him. Nevertheless, there would certainly be a serious moral problem with his acting as if his car were parked legally—by, say, remaining seated in his easy chair. An appeal to merely *pragmatic* encroachment cannot explain this case in the same way that it explains high-stakes gambles like Fantl & McGrath’s.

Just what is the problem with the apathetic man’s failing to go check his car? Well, we might cite any of several problems. Perhaps, for instance, his inactivity reveals his repugnant character. But any satisfactory explanation of the problem with this man’s action must also note an epistemic failing: his belief that his car is parked legally is not warranted enough. To see this, consider a final modification of the maniacal traffic officer case. In this modified version, the man, while retaining his repugnant character, has arbitrarily strong evidence for the belief that his car is parked legally. Perhaps, for instance, he is standing right next to his car, seeing that it is parked legally, and hearing several policemen say, “yep, that car sure is parked legally.” In such a case, at least one moral problem with the man dissipates. Even if he does continue to fall short morally in some respects, he does not fall short morally by calling off the search for further evidence that his car is parked legally. Imagine the person trying to defend his inactivity from moral criticism by saying, “Nothing I do will make a difference! My car is parked legally.” In this most recent case, the apathetic man’s epistemic position is strong enough that this is a legitimate excuse. Not so in the original case; if the man is sitting in his easy chair, with only a vague memory of the way he parked his car, he cannot morally excuse his action by appeal to his belief that the car is parked legally. We must explain the difference between these two cases by appealing to a distinctive sort of moral problem—one that arises in virtue of weakness in epistemic warrant. In the original case, the apathetic car owner’s belief that his car is parked legally is insufficiently warranted to morally excuse his inactivity.

This point bears emphasis, because without it, the thesis of moral encroachment might seem like an obvious non-starter. There are a multitude of ways in which a person’s action or reasoning might be morally problematic, and not all of those moral shortcomings are plausibly rooted in that person’s epistemic warrant for her beliefs. Imagine, for instance, that you attempt to poison your wealthy uncle in order to get his inheritance. You carry out your nefarious plan, all the while relying on fallible beliefs (like the belief *that this poison is strong enough to kill an adult man*). Your action, and reasoning, would be morally problematic. But this sort of moral problem does not lie in your degree of epistemic warrant for any of your beliefs. After all, even if you attempted to poison your uncle on much stronger or much weaker evidence of your poison’s strength, you would still be engaged in an evil project. This sort of moral problem, then, bears no obvious connection to the epistemic warrant for your beliefs. The problem with the morally apathetic car owner’s action, by contrast, is a problem that apparently does have a strong connection to the epistemic warrant for his beliefs. It’s only the latter sort of problem that provides support for the thesis of moral encroachment.

As a result, the argument on offer here does not have the implausible result that no one can ever act in a way that is morally problematic on the basis of sufficiently warranted premises. There is a nice symmetry between this conclusion and a conclusion about pragmatic encroachment mentioned earlier in the section. Above, I noted that the defender of pragmatic encroachment must accept that it’s possible to act irrationally from known premises. She can get this result by distinguishing between actions that are irrational in virtue of an epistemic problem (like weakness of warrant) and actions that are irrational for other reasons (like practically irrational aims). In the same way, the defender of moral encroachment must accept that it’s possible to act immorally from known premises. She can get this result by distinguishing between actions that are immoral in virtue of an epistemic problem (like weakness of warrant) and actions that are immoral for other reasons (like bad desires or values). Only certain cases of morally problematic action—like the apathetic car owner’s—betray a distinctively epistemic problem, and thereby provide support for the thesis of moral encroachment.[[16]](#footnote-16)

We’ve now seen an argument, the moral argument from high-stakes gambles, that can support the moral action-environment link. What’s more, it can do so in just the same way that Fantl and McGrath’s argument from high-stakes gambles supports the practical action-environment link. Section 4 of this paper will consider and reject an attempt to accept Fantl and McGrath’s argument while rejecting the moral argument from high-stakes gambles. But before we consider that objection, let’s turn to another argument for SSI that can be used to support the conclusion of moral encroachment.

1. The Argument from Unacceptable Practical Reasoning

Fantl and McGrath’s argument from high-stakes gambles is a particularly explicit attempt to defend the action-environment link. But some defenders of SSI may have good reason to argue for that link along different lines. Hawthorne (2004) enumerates some benefits of adopting SSI without calling any particular attention to stakes, and Hawthorne and Stanley (2008, 588) worry outright that stakes-sensitivity may not adequately explain the connection between practical environment and knowledge. In light of this, we should consider a line of argument in support of the practical action-environment link that does not require an appeal to stakes. This section shows how such an argument can be extracted from the examples of unacceptable practical reasoning that appear in Hawthorne (2004) and Hawthorne and Stanley (2008).

Consider a contrast between two chains of practical reasoning that start from the same premise. First, suppose you are in a bookstore thinking about whether to buy a visitor’s guide to Blackpool. You reason as follows:

I will be going to Blackpool next year.

So I will be able to make good use of a Blackpool visitor’s guide next year.

So I ought to buy a Blackpool visitor’s guide.

This seems like it could be a perfectly acceptable chain of practical reasoning. Next, suppose that on your way out of the bookstore, you are offered life insurance. It would be unacceptable for you to reason thus:

I will be going to Blackpool next year.

So I won’t die beforehand.

So I ought to wait until next year before buying life insurance. (Hawthorne 2004, 175).

Intuitively, the problem with this second bit of practical reasoning lies in the fact that you are insufficiently epistemic warranted in the first premise (Hawthorne 2004, 175-6). Your epistemic position is no longer strong enough for you to take it for granted that you will be going to Blackpool next year. But we can stipulate that nothing changes between the time of the first bit of reasoning and the second bit of reasoning except that you are offered life insurance. The fact that you are engaged in practical reasoning about whether to buy life insurance, then, has made a difference to whether you are warranted enough to rely on one of your beliefs in your practical reasoning.

Contrasts like the one above suggest an argument for an action-environment link that is quite similar to (1)-(5):

(1’) Consider some proposition *p* that you know fallibly.In certain practical environments, you are warranted enough to rely on *p* as a premise in practical reasoning.

(2’) But in other practical environments, it is rationally unacceptable for you to rely on *p* as a premise in practical reasoning.

(3’) (2’) is true because, in the latter sort of practical environment, you are not epistemically warranted enough to rely on *p*.

(4’) The only difference between the former and latter bits of practical reasoning is a difference in the facts about things that matter *to you*—specifically, a difference in which of the things that matter to you are the topic of your current practical reasoning.

(5’) So, **Practical Action-Environment Link**: Facts about what matters to *S* (which are not paradigmatically epistemic features of an environment) make a difference as to whether S is warranted enough rely on *p* as a premise in practical reasoning.

I’ll now argue that an argument much like (1’)-(5’) can be used to support the moral action-environment link.

(6’) Consider some proposition *p* that you know fallibly.In certain practical

environments, you are warranted enough to rely on *p* as a premise in practical reasoning.

(7’) But in other practical environments, it is morally problematic for you to rely on *p* as a premise in practical reasoning.

(8’) (7’) is true because, in the latter sort of practical environment, you are not epistemically warranted enough to rely on *p*.

(9’) The only difference between the former and latter bits of practical reasoning is a difference in the moral facts relevant to your decision.

(10’) So, **Moral Action-Environment Link**: Facts about what matters *morally* (which are not paradigmatically epistemic features of an environment) make a difference as to whether S is warranted enough to rely on *p* as a premise in practical reasoning.

To see the appeal of this new argument for the moral action-environment link, return to the example of the morally apathetic car owner. When no lives are at stake, there is nothing wrong with his using the following reasoning to justify remaining in his easy chair:

My car is parked legally.

So no one will be killed on account of the way that my car is parked.

So I ought to stay in my easy chair.

But a change in the moral facts in the man’s environment suffices to make this reasoning morally unacceptable. Once the man is aware that the maniacal traffic officer poses a potential threat to the lives of innocents, he cannot use this reasoning to justify remaining in his easy chair. Moreover, this reasoning is morally unacceptable for precisely the same reason that the reasoning about life insurance is rationally unacceptable; in both cases, the first premise is insufficiently warranted. Just as you are under rational pressure not to take it for granted that you will go to Blackpool next year once you are offered life insurance, the car owner is under moral pressure not to take it for granted that his car is parked legally once he learns that lives hang in the balance.

The same considerations that support (8) in the modified argument from high-stakes gambles also motivate (8’). If the morally apathetic car owner gains extremely strong evidence that his car is parked legally, at least one moral problem with his using the reasoning above dissipates. So at least one moral problem with the practical reasoning above is a problem with the strength of the man’s warrant for believing that his car is parked legally.

In the reasoning about the car, then, we have an example of practical reasoning that might be either morally acceptable or morally problematic depending on the moral facts in the reasoner’s practical environment. This suggests that whether a person is warranted enough to rely on a belief in practical reasoning depends on moral facts. In other words, we can borrow yet another standard line of thinking from the defenders of SSI to generate another argument for the moral action-environment link.

1. An Objection

It’s worth calling attention to one major difference between standard arguments for the action-environment link and the modified versions that I’ve been offering. This is a difference between two senses in which I’ve used the phrase ‘warranted enough to act as if *p.’* The standard arguments for SSI are concerned with the question of whether a subject is in a position to rationally perform the action that would be rationally appropriate on the assumption that *p*.[[17]](#footnote-17) Call this the question of whether a subject is warranted enough to *rationally* act as if *p*. The modified arguments for SSI that I’ve offered, by contrast, are concerned with a slightly different question. In cases like the maniacal traffic officer scenario, the relevant question is whether a subject can, without behaving morally problematically, perform an action that is morally appropriate on the assumption that *p*. Call this the question of whether a subject is warranted enough to *morally* act as if *p*. These are two importantly different questions, and they concern two importantly different properties.

This difference between ways to understand the phrase ‘warranted enough to act as if *p*’ suggests a way for the defender of pragmatic encroachment to avoid committing herself to moral encroachment. She might argue, first, that I have used the phrase to pick out properties that are not coextensive. This would mean that, in some cases, a person’s epistemic position is strong enough that she is warranted enough to rationally act as if *p*, but weak enough that she is not warranted enough to morally act as if *p.* I’ll simply grant the imagined objector this first step.

Second, the imagined objector might argue that knowledge requires that one’s belief is ‘warranted enough’ in the first sense, but not the second. She might argue, in other words, that a person can know that *p* even though he is not in a position to act as if *p,* morally speaking. Perhaps this is the right thing to say about the morally apathetic car owner in the high-moral-stakes case. Since the fact that innocent people might die does not matter *to him*, there is no encroachment on his knowledge. He knows that his car is parked legally, and he can rationally stay in his easy chair. It’s just that his epistemic position isn’t strong enough for his remaining in his easy chair (an action that would be morally appropriate on the assumption that his car is parked legally) to be *morally* unproblematic.

To see the problem for this objection, we need to widen our focus and consider the typical arguments that SSI-theorists offer for the knowledge-action link. After all, if we are to read ‘warranted enough to act as if *p*’ in the action-environment link as ‘warranted enough to rationally act as if *p*,’ but not as ‘warranted enough to morally act as if *p*,’ then we must read the same phrase in the same way when it shows up in the knowledge-action link. Otherwise, the argument from the knowledge-action link and the action-environment link to Subject-Sensitivity will not be valid. So, do the arguments for the knowledge-action link support the restricted reading—that is, that if S knows that *p*, then S is warranted enough to rationally act as if *p*, though not necessarily warranted enough to morally act as if *p*? As it turns out, no. The reasons to think that there is a tie between knowledge and *rationally* acceptable action are also reasons to think that there is a tie between knowledge and *morally* acceptable action.

Recall the two lines of support for the knowledge-action link that were discussed in section 1 above. Its defenders cite our common practice of defending and encouraging actions by talking about knowledge. They also note the close connection between our judgments about knowledge and our judgments about negligence and blame.

To the extent that these considerations motivate acceptance of a link between knowledge and the rationality of action, they also motivate acceptance of a link between knowledge and the moral appropriateness of action. We can defend the moral appropriateness of action by making claims about knowledge. As we’ve already noted, the car owner in the high-moral-stakes case can attempt to portray his action as morally unproblematic by saying, “What’s all the fuss? I know my car is parked legally.” And if a person is worried about whether she has enough evidence to be morally blameless in acting on a given belief, we can encourage her to act by claiming that she knows that her action will work. This suggests that the average person considers knowers of *p* to be warranted enough to morally act as if *p*—where, again, morally acting as if *p* means taking an action that would be morally appropriate on the assumption that *p*.

Further, the conceptual connection between knowledge, negligence, and blame for *immoral* action seems just as strong as the conceptual connection between knowledge, negligence, and blame for *irrational* action. Recall the example of the parent who responds to a charge of negligence, and attempts to escape blame, by citing her knowledge that the dog playing with her child is a safe one. At first glance, this practice seems to be *even more* strongly connected to the concern that there might be a moral problem with her action than to the concern that there might be a rational problem with her action. In asserting that she knows the dog is safe, the mother is primarily concerned to communicate that her epistemic position with respect to the dog does not make her action morallyproblematic. Again, this is some evidence that the everyday speaker treats knowledge that *p* as a sufficient condition for being warranted enough to morally act as if *p*.

The arguments for the knowledge-action link, then, do not support a reading of ‘warranted enough to act as if *p*’ as ‘warranted enough to act as if *p* rationally, but not necessarily morally.’ To the contrary, those arguments can be also used to support the conclusion that, when a person knows that *p*, the weakness of her epistemic position cannot stand in the way of the moral appropriateness of her acting as if *p*. To the extent that we have a good case for a connection between knowledge and rational action, we also have a good case for a connection between knowledge and morally unproblematic action. So the arguments for SSI suggest that, when a person’s belief that *p* has the level of warrant necessary for knowledge, its level of warrant cannot present a problem either for the rationality of action or for the moral appropriateness of action.

This means that the defender of SSI does not have a principled way of endorsing the arguments from high-stake gambles or unacceptable practical reasoning without also endorsing the moral versions of these arguments. Our beliefs are often insufficiently warranted to allow us to rationally take certain high-stakes gambles. But our beliefs are also often insufficiently warranted to us to permissibly act on them when something very morally important hangs in the balance. To the extent that the former phenomenon illustrates pragmatic encroachment on knowledge, the latter phenomenon illustrates moral encroachment on knowledge.

1. Conclusion: Further Questions

To the extent that there are good arguments for the thesis of pragmatic encroachment on knowledge, there are also good arguments for thesis of moral encroachment on knowledge.

This surprising result raises pressing questions for the defender of SSI. If knowledge is subject to both pragmatic and moral encroachment, how do the two interact? Are some situations moral-encroachment situations, while others are pragmatic-encroachment situations? Can some situations be both, such that the amount of warrant sufficient for knowledge is set both by practical facts and by moral facts simultaneously? Can moral encroachment and pragmatic encroachment ever work against one another, such that, for instance, the moral facts raise the standard for warrant and facts about the subject’s goals lower the standard for warrant?

This sort of conflict seems particularly apt to arise in cases where a person does not care about something of moral importance. Consider an example. Suppose that I am quite rich, and I have to choose between giving a sizable donation to Charity A or Charity B. I know that both of these charities are legally legitimate. But I also know that one of the two is involved in some sort of morally bad project, such that it would be morally awful of me to become complicit in that project by donating. Unfortunately, it is somewhat difficult to say which of the two charities does the morally bad work. It matters to me a bit that I not give to the morally bad charity, and it matters to me a great deal that my donation happens in the next five minutes. If I don’t donate by then, I will not be able to deduct my donation from my taxes.

In this case, it’s tempting to think that pragmatic encroachment *lowers* the standards for knowledge-level warrant. After all, the surest way for me to achieve the goals that matter to me most is to gather some evidence about which charity is least likely to be the morally bad one, and then to donate to that charity in the next five minutes. The weakness of my epistemic position with respect to my belief will not stand in the way of my being rational to act on it[[18]](#footnote-18). On the other hand, it’s also tempting to think that, in this case, moral encroachment *raises* the standards for knowledge-level warrant. The weakness of my epistemic position makes my action morally problematic; a morally better person would take the time to be far more certain that he was not complicit in the bad project, no matter the effect on his taxes.

Cases of conflict like this one suggest that the relationship between moral encroachment and pragmatic encroachment is not a puzzle that the defender of SSI can simply shrug off. This is a crucial and much-neglected issue that should be explored in any thorough defense of SSI.

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1. See Ichikawa and Steup (2016, section 11) for a similar understanding of what subject-sensitivity amounts to, and for a useful contrast with Stanley’s alternative claim, interest-relativity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I set aside the following trivial connection: knowledge *of* any proposition, including facts about, e.g., practical interests or moral obligations, requires that the proposition in question be true. In this sense, whether I know that *p* can depend on the truth of moral facts or facts about what matters to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, e.g., Fantl & McGrath (2007, 559n1), Stanley and Hawthorne (2008, 583), and Stanley (2005, 92-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pace (2011) argues for moral encroachment on epistemic justification, although he explicitly stops short of drawing any conclusions about knowledge (261). But Pace’s argument is significantly different from the argument of this paper. Most notably, Pace argues for moral encroachment without making any appeal to extant arguments for SSI. This paper, by contrast, engages directly with extant arguments for SSI and reveals their connection to moral encroachment. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Just what does it mean for something to matter *to a subject?* The arguments below are compatible with several different answers to this question. It’s not totally clear whether the current defenders of SSI are more easily interpreted as focusing on very subjective practical facts (like the fact that some action would further a project of mine, regardless of whether that project’s realization would be good for me) or more objective practical facts (like the fact that some outcome would be in my interests, regardless of whether or not I actually desire or aim at that outcome). I will not attempt to settle this interpretive question; either notion is compatible with the arguments presented here.

   That said, I set aside here at the outset views that tie morality and practical normativity very closely. Consider, for instance, views on which the fact that it would be morally wrong for a person to φ entails that it matters a great deal *to that person* that she not φ. On views of this sort, variations in the moral facts will sometimes amount to changes in the practical facts. A defender of pragmatic encroachment who takes such a view, then, can explain all the cases below by appeal to practical facts; she can take the position that moral facts have no *distinctive* force in epistemology. But she nevertheless must grant one of the most *prima facie* surprising theses suggested in this paper: epistemic facts are interestingly connected to moral facts.

   That claim—that epistemic facts are interestingly connected to moral facts—is much less obvious, and a much more daring claim, on the (plausible) assumption that what matters to a subject can diverge dramatically from what matters morally. This paper aims to show that, *even granting* significant separation between what matters to a subject and what matters morally, the arguments for pragmatic encroachment can be adapted to support moral encroachment. (Thanks to Tristram McPherson for useful discussion here.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For criticism of the biconditional knowledge-action link, see Fantl and McGrath (2009, 124-5); and Smithies (2012, 269-70). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Both of the considerations below can be, and have been, used to defend the biconditional knowledge-action link as well (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, 571-3), but I’ll be solely concerned with the way in which they support the claim that knowledge is a sufficient condition for epistemically unproblematic action. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Since most defenders of SSI do not make the distinction between pragmatic encroachment and moral encroachment, they are usually not explicit about their adherence to the former thesis rather than the latter. Nevertheless, the focus of their writing does consistently suggest a focus on matters of importance *to the subject* rather than matters of objective importance; see, e.g., Fantl & McGrath (2007, 559n1), Stanley and Hawthorne (2008, 583), and Stanley (2005, 92-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This gloss relies on a notion of fallibilism that Fantl and McGrath (2009) call “Strong Fallibilism.” In their (2007), Fantl and McGrath appeal to a considerably weaker notion of fallibilism (559). On either reading of fallibilism, the argument from high-stakes gambles can be modified to yield the moral version of the action-environment link. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Some infallibilists may resist the argument from high-stakes gambles in a fairly flatfooted way: we are not rational to take high-stakes gambles on most propositions precisely because there is (always) an epistemic chance for us that those propositions are not true, and that we therefore cannot know those propositions. This approach threatens to rule out an enormous amount of everyday knowledge. Other infallibilists may respond to the argument in a different way; they may incorporate subject-sensitivity into their account of epistemic possibility. This amounts to the admission that whether or not there is an epistemic chance for me that *p* depends on features of my environment that are not paradigmatically epistemic features. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting more detail about infallibilism, and to Declan Smithiesfor helpful discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This formulation is somewhat loose; I grant that, in all the cases to be discussed in this paper, differences in practical and moral facts will always be accompanied by differences in the non-normative facts on which they supervene. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On some views, aims can only be practically irrational in virtue of incoherence with other elements of the subject’s psychology; on others, aims can also be practically irrational in virtue of their failure to track objective facts about what matters to the subject. The argument in the main text is compatible with either explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The argument from high-stakes gambles also applies neatly to the bank cases that pervade so much of the discussion about SSI (see especially Stanley 2005, 1-15). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Interestingly, Fantl and McGrath (2002, 85) describe a case remarkably similar to this one. Even more interestingly, they use the case in the course of arguing for an action-environment link. But they do not acknowledge (and might not accept) the striking implication of the thought experiment: knowledge can depend on moral facts in just the same way that it depends on facts about what matters to the subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Just what would be morally problematic about your staying in your easy chair in the high-stakes case? One intuitively appealing answer is that it is a morally wrong action. But this answer is not available on all views about wrong action. Certain objective consequentialists, for instance, might say that you are right to stay in your easy chair because, as a matter of fact, this is the action that will have the best consequences. Such consequentialists will be likely to claim that the moral problem in this scenario is a problem with you as an agent, not with your action (cf. Moore 2006). But on any plausible first-order normative theory, there will be *some* moral problem that arises when you stay in your easy chair precisely because of the weakness of your epistemic position. I say more about this in the main text below. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. An anonymous referee asks for more detail about just which environments are the ones in which moral facts affect warrant for belief. While I remain uncommitted to any particular story about the precise relationship between moral facts and epistemic warrant (and, indeed, uncommitted even to the thesis of moral encroachment), it will be useful to sketch one such story in this footnote. In doing so, I provide a sort of possibility proof, showing that there are viable pictures of moral encroachment that preserve the crucial analogy with viable pictures of pragmatic encroachment.

    The defender of moral encroachment might claim that S’s epistemic position with respect to *p* is insufficient if the most subjectively morally choiceworthy action available to S is distinct from the most subjectively morally choiceworthy action available to S on the assumption that *p*. The analogous principle about pragmatic encroachment is: S’s epistemic position with respect to *p* is insufficient if the rationally best action available to S is distinct from the rationally best action available to S on the assumption that *p*.

    Note that this principle makes no reference at all to the way that S would in fact act if P were the case (or if she believed that *p* were the case). So it is in no danger of falsely implying that the fact that a person will in fact act immorally if *p* (or if he believes that *p*) has any tendency to undermine his epistemic warrant for *p*. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The ensuing discussion could be translated from a discussion about whether a person is warranted enough to act as if *p* to a discussion about whether a person is warranted enough to use *p* in her practical reasoning. So the same objection, and the same reply, could be made with respect to the argument in section 2 and the argument in section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Schroeder (2012) offers one candidate explanation of how cases of forced choice, like this one, might lower the standards for knowledge-level warrant. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)