

# *Possessing reasons: why the awareness-first approach is better than the knowledge-first approach*

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# 6

## Awareness and the Possession of Reasons

### 6.1 Introduction

It is now common, though not uncontroversial, to regard facts as the normative reasons that justify our actions and attitudes. But in order for a fact to be a reason that justifies an action or attitude for a given agent it must be a fact that is *possessed* by that agent. There are a range of views of what it takes to possess a fact in a way that allows it to function as a reason for an agent. One prominent class of theories of possession are centred on knowledge: we possess a fact  $p$  as a reason only if we know that  $p$  or we are in a position to know that  $p$ .<sup>1</sup>

Discussions of knowledge-centric views of possession have overlooked the insight of the previous chapters, namely, that knowledge is itself an instance of factual awareness and knowing a fact is not the only way to be aware of a fact. The upshot is an alternative way of thinking about the possession of reasons: we possess a fact  $p$  as a reason to  $F$  only if we are aware of the fact that  $p$  or we are in a position to be aware of the fact that  $p$ . Awareness-centric accounts of the possession of reasons are logically weaker than knowledge-centric accounts, allowing for the possession of reasons in a range of cases where knowledge and the potential for knowledge are absent. This is just the result we need if we are to explain the reasons we possess in cases of environmental luck, in cases involving explicit deductive updates, and in cases where we have conclusive evidence for self-defeating propositions.

The question of whether knowledge or factual awareness should be central to our understanding of possession is a question about the epistemic relation a subject must bear to a reason if they are to possess it. But satisfying the epistemic condition is arguably not enough for possessing a reason. This issue will be taken up in the final section. The importance of giving an

<sup>1</sup> Williamson (2000), Littlejohn (2017), Neta (2018), Lord (2018), Sylvan (2018).

awareness-centred theory of possession is not only that it can help us explain the reasons we possess in cases that knowledge-centred theories cannot, but it helps us understand how knowledge is essentially a normative state, an issue we will return to in Chapter 7.

## 6.2 Background I: Reasons-First Epistemology

The reasons-first approach to justification is reductionistic. It purports to give us an illuminating and complete account of *ultima facie* justification (rationality) in terms of the possession of sufficient reasons. That is, one has *ultima facie* justification to believe that  $p$  iff one has sufficient reasons to believe that  $p$ .<sup>2</sup> This generates three questions: what are reasons? when are they sufficient? and what does it take to possess them? I will summarize a prominent answer to the first two questions before introducing two knowledge-centric ways of answering the third.

What are reasons? When it comes to the ontology of reasons, the standard view in metaethics and a quickly growing view among epistemologists is that reasons are token identical to either facts or true propositions. I'll refer to this as *broad factualism*, and I'll also treat facts as identical to true propositions in what follows. The driving motivation behind broad factualism has to do with our justificatory practices: we aim to reference facts (true propositions) when engaged in the activity of justifying the actions and attitudes of ourselves and others. We say things like: the fact that there are elephants in Africa is a reason to believe that they've not yet gone extinct, and the fact that you're hungry is a reason to get a snack, and the fact that a potential action would cause harm is a reason to refrain from performing that action, and so forth. When we recognize that our attempts to justify actions and attitudes reference falsehoods rather than facts we view the attempted justification as defective. Those who take reasons to be facts take this aspect of our justificatory practice as illuminating *the sources*

<sup>2</sup> This is obviously a characterization of *ultima facie* propositional justification, doxastic justification requires more. See Carter and Bondy (2019) and Silva and Oliveira (2022). For comparison between the mass noun 'reason' and the count noun 'reasons' see Fogal (2016), who is also critical of the reasons-first programme. One of Fogal's primary objections to the reasons-first programme is the possibility of having sufficient *reason* to believe without having sufficient *reasons* to believe. The answer to the problem of basic knowledge in Chapter 7 also addresses this objection.

of our justification for our attitudes and actions, i.e. facts.<sup>3</sup> If you think falsehoods as well as facts can be reasons that justify actions and attitudes you can think of what follows as a discussion about the possession of *objective reasons* and a corresponding sort of *objective justification*.<sup>4</sup>

While broad factualism is gaining ground in epistemology, the alternative view among epistemologists has been a version of mentalism which holds that epistemic reasons for belief are (or include) non-factive representational mental states: perceptual experiences, introspective experiences, memorial experiences, intuitive experiences, as well as certain beliefs.<sup>5</sup> From the perspective of broad factualism, the treatment of such mental states as reasons makes our justificatory practices puzzling and mistakenly identifies reasons with the mental states that enable us to possess reasons. Mentalism will be returned to in Chapter 7 in connection with the normativity of knowledge. However, it should be noted that much of what follows is compatible with a mentalist view on which mental states that constitute states of factual awareness are taken to be objective reasons.

When are reasons sufficient? Generally, sufficiency is regarded as a matter of weightiness: *S* has *sufficient* reasons to believe *p* iff the reasons *S* possesses for believing *p* are at least as weighty as the reasons *S* possesses for not believing *p*.<sup>6</sup> Talk of ‘the weight’ of reasons is meant to capture the way in which reasons can ‘stack-up’ in favour of and in opposition to certain responses. For example, in the case of belief you can have all kinds of reasons to believe *p* and all kinds of reasons to refrain from believing *p*. But you only have sufficient reason to believe *p* when your reasons in favour of believing are not outweighed by your reasons to refrain. For the most part this way of thinking about sufficiency is independent of one’s stance on the nature of reasons.

<sup>3</sup> Broad factualism is a prominent position in the literature on the normativity of action (Scanlon 1998; Raz 1999; Dancy 2000; Schroeder 2007; Thomson 2008; Alvarez 2010; Skorupski 2010; Parfit 2011; Whiting 2014; Kiesewetter 2017) and it has already secured a stable and growing place in current epistemological treatments of the normativity of belief (Whiting 2014; Schroeder 2015a; Lord 2018; Littlejohn 2017; Kiesewetter 2017; Sylvan 2015, 2016, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Schroeder (2015a,b) has defended the idea that falsehoods can be reasons and has argued that knowledge that *p* requires that one not have false reasons that defeat the subjective rationality of believing that *p*. This is addressed in Chapter 8.

<sup>5</sup> See Davidson (1986), Huemer (2001, 2007), Pollock and Cruz (1999), Silins (2007), Neta (2010), and Pryor (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Some might argue that in the case of having sufficient reasons for belief one’s reasons for belief must not only be *at least as weighty*, but *weightier* than one’s reasons to not believe. This issue has a bearing on familiar debates about uniqueness and permissivism. Nothing will turn on this in what follows.

What does it take to possess a reason? While mentalists are free to hold that all reasons are possessed reasons since they are the mental states of those who have them, broad factualists need to say something substantive about what it takes to possess a reason. If reasons are facts then they are not automatically within one's ken in a way that could justify one's attitudes and actions. Imagine that you are currently standing in front of an oak tree and you have no other information about the oak apart from your general knowledge of oaks and what you can visually 'pick up' about this oak while looking at it. The fact that the oak you are looking at is 613 inches tall is a conclusive reason to believe that the oak is between 612 and 614 inches tall. But if you are wholly ignorant of the fact that it is 613 inches tall, then without further information about its height you lack justification to believe that the oak is between 612 and 614 inches tall. What is needed if you are to have justification to believe this is that you stand in an epistemically significant relation to the fact that the oak is 613 inches tall (or some other relevant fact about its height). This is where theories of possession enter the picture.

### 6.3 Background II: Motivations for Knowledge-Centric Views of Possession

One prominent view of possession is centred on knowledge: we possess only those facts that we know:

**Possession Requires Knowledge ( $P \rightarrow K$ ).** Necessarily, *S* possesses the fact that *p* as a reason to *F* only if *S* knows that *p*.

Littlejohn (2017) and, on a natural reading, Williamson (2000) are both proponents of ( $P \rightarrow K$ ) and their motivations for it largely overlap as both appeal to cases where we seem not to possess reasons because we fail to know them.<sup>7</sup> We'll focus on Littlejohn's defence of ( $P \rightarrow K$ ) in this section

<sup>7</sup> In Williamson's (2000) view, evidence is to be identified with true propositions and the evidence one possesses includes all and only the true propositions one knows. If one thought that evidence is always to be identified with reasons for belief, Williamson's view would seem to be a version of broad factualism which takes knowledge to be the relevant epistemic condition for possession. However, the cases of self-defeat discussed in Chapter 4 threaten any easy identification of the *evidence that p* relation and the *reason to believe that p* relation. See also Silva and Tal (2021).

and return in the final section of this chapter to discuss the lottery-like cases that Williamson (2000) has used in defence of  $(P \rightarrow K)$ .

While Littlejohn points to various criteria a theory of possession must satisfy, the main argument that favours his knowledge-centric view of possession is driven by a kind of Gettier case:

Consider Nozick's experience machine. Agnes undergoes a series of experiences that dispose her to form false beliefs about her surroundings. It seems to her that she and everyone she cares about are flourishing. [While nearly all of her beliefs in this regard are mistaken] some of her beliefs happen to be true....it seems to her that her brother has just crossed the stage at graduation and a smile stretches across Agnes' face because she believes he just graduated. What the lab technicians don't realize is that precisely as Agnes undergoes this experience her brother crosses the stage and accepts his diploma. (Littlejohn 2017: 26–7)

What judgment should we draw about Agnes and the reasons she has? Here is a convincing thought:

While she believes correctly that her brother is graduating and is happy because she believes this, her reason for being happy isn't that her brother is graduating. She cannot be rationally guided by such a fact, not when she's cut off from reality. (Littlejohn 2017: 26–7)

This is right. Agnes is not, nor can she be, happy for the reason that her brother is graduating. Though she truly believes this, she is too far separated from that fact for it to be a reason she could respond to in any way. As Littlejohn argues, it seems plausible that possessing a reason requires at least the possibility of responding to it. Accordingly, Agnes fails to possess the fact that her brother is graduating as a reason. And  $(P \rightarrow K)$  can easily explain this since Agnes is unable to know that her brother is graduating.

Not all knowledge-centric theorists have been so optimistic about  $(P \rightarrow K)$ . Against  $(P \rightarrow K)$ , Lord (2018: 72ff) draws attention to counterexamples involving inattention. Here's an instance of his style of counterexample:

*Inattentive Perception.* I have a checkered carpet in my home made up of seven different kinds of coloured squares: green, yellow, red, orange, purple, dark blue, and light blue. There are four rows of colours, and in each row each colour occurs exactly once. Suppose you came over for

dinner one evening. You'd have a visual experience of a coloured checkered carpet, and there are all kinds of facts that your visual experience would seem to put you in possession of even if you did not believe them. For example, (F1) that each determinate colour in each square occurs exactly four times, (F2) that there are two determinate shades of blue, (F3) that there are four rows, etc. There is an exceptionally large number of facts that such a perceptual experience could give you access to while hosting it. But many of these accessible facts will not translate into beliefs simply because you are not paying attention to them.

Before coming into my home you had no beliefs about (F1)–(F3), and even while looking at my carpet you might not come to believe (F1)–(F3) simply because your attention is elsewhere, e.g. suppose we were having a rich and gripping philosophical conversation while you were absently looking directly at this carpet. Since you are looking directly at this carpet it seems like you are unjustified in failing to believe (MoreBlue): that there are more (determinable) blue squares than any other coloured square.<sup>8</sup> What could explain this lack of justification? Not your knowledge of, say, (F1) and (F2). Recall, you don't believe either claim because your attention is swept up by our conversation. So ( $P \rightarrow K$ ) doesn't allow you to possess (F1) and (F2). But if your non-belief in (MoreBlue) is unjustified while you are looking at my carpet this has to be explained by reasons that you have access to, and in the present case it seems like this will have to include (F1) and (F2). This is a problem for ( $P \rightarrow K$ ).

If knowledge is to be central to our understanding of the possession of reasons and if we are to take cases of inattention as counterexamples to ( $P \rightarrow K$ ), what we need is a theory of possession that can explain how I possess (F1) and (F2) in Inattentive Perception. But it must be a theory of possession that retains the explanatory power of ( $P \rightarrow K$ ), which lies with its ability to explain why Agnes fails to possess the fact that her brother has just graduated.

Here is a modest revision that some have suggested.<sup>9</sup> When it comes only to the epistemic constraints on possessing a fact the following holds:

**Possession Requires Being in Position to Know ( $P \rightarrow PK$ ).** Necessarily, *S* possesses the fact that *p* as a reason to *F* only if *S* is in a position to know that *p*.

<sup>8</sup> You would, however, typically be excusable for failing to believe this.

<sup>9</sup> Lord (2018: 67–96), Neta (2018), and Sylvan (2018: 212).

Lord (2018) characterizes being in a position to know as follows:

You're in a position to know  $p$  when all the impersonal conditions for knowledge are met. The personal conditions are (1) believing  $p$  and (2) believing  $p$  for the right reasons. The impersonal conditions are just whatever are left over. (Lord 2018: 92)<sup>10</sup>

According to Lord, the left over impersonal conditions include the truth of  $p$  and standing in a non-accidental relation to  $p$ .

While knowing is a logically stronger relation than being in a position to know, they both have truth and non-accidentality requirements. Thus, for example, if knowledge requires safe belief, then being in a position to know requires being in a position to safely believe. Since Agnes neither safely believes that her brother is graduating nor is in a position to safely believe it, it follows on a safety-theoretic view of knowledge that Agnes neither knows nor is in a position to know that her brother is graduating. Thus by  $(P \rightarrow PK)$  it follows that Agnes doesn't possess that fact. Accordingly, the truth of  $(P \rightarrow PK)$  seems just as well placed as  $(P \rightarrow K)$  to help us understand why our intuitive judgment about Agnes is correct.

Furthermore, in Inattentive Perception while you do not know (F1) or (F2) you are clearly in a position to know them despite your inattention. For as Lord (2018: 92) points out it, if you don't already know that  $p$  you may yet be in a position to know it, and hence stand in a relevant non-accidental relation to  $p$  if 'you have some experiences such that, if you could and did attend to certain features of those experiences and uninferentially form a belief that  $p$  in the right kind of way, then you would know that  $p$ '. Clearly, this condition can hold in cases like Inattentive Perception with regard to you and (F1) and (F2). So  $(P \rightarrow PK)$  has an explanatory edge over  $(P \rightarrow K)$ .

#### 6.4 Problems for Knowledge-Centric Accounts of Possession

There are at least three kinds of cases where knowledge-centric accounts of possession fail to be extensionally adequate. The first two involve cases where agents are inferentially aware of facts without being in a position to

<sup>10</sup> For similar characterizations of being in a position to know see Chapter 5, Section 5.6.



know them. The final one concerns non-inferential awareness in cases of environmental luck.

### 6.4.1 Explicit Deductive Updates

It was plausible to think that we could come to possess reasons even before we came to believe and know them when *inattentive* to the factors that put us in a position to know (as in Inattentive Perception). It is even more plausible to think that we can come to possess new reasons when *attentive* to entailment relations from existing knowledge. There are two such cases worth highlighting and both involve inferential awareness.

Here is an example we have encountered before in Chapter 4, Section 4.3. Recall that when it comes to agents like us, we sometimes update our beliefs *in response to*, and therefore *after*, recognizing entailments from our beliefs. That is:

**Explicit Deductive Updating.** It is possible for a thinker to first come to know ( $q$ , and  $q$  entails  $p$ ), and then in response begin her update process so that she later comes to believe  $p$ .<sup>11</sup>

Explicit Deductive Updating identifies not just a possible way to update one's beliefs, but an ordinary one. To illustrate this, take the following two claims:

(G) North Rhine-Westphalia is the most populated state within Germany, and Germany has no more than 85 million residents.

(N) North Rhine-Westphalia has no more than 85 million residents.

It was, embarrassingly, not so long ago that I learned that North-Rhine Westphalia was a German state. So it was not so long ago that I failed to know (G). But even before knowing (G) I could easily have known that (G) entails (N): (N) is a rather obvious deductive consequence of (G). To know it I need only have been presented with (G) and (N) and reflected on their logical relations. In such a case it is possible that I would first come to know

<sup>11</sup> Obviously, not all deductive updating need be via explicit knowledge of entailment relations. One can also just come to believe  $p$  by deducing it from  $q$  while not consciously appreciating the fact that  $q$  entails  $p$ .

that (G) entails (N), and then come to know (G), *and then in response* update my beliefs so that I believe and come to know (N). This is an explicit deductive update.

As argued in Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1 it seems plausible to claim that before coming to believe (and thus know) (N), I could be factually aware of it in virtue of competently deducing it from (G). This gave us a counterexample to  $(A \rightarrow K)$ , but it also provides us with the materials for a counterexample to  $(P \rightarrow K)$ . For in the case described above I'm aware of the fact that (N) and I possess (N). This is intuitive. Indeed, it is just as intuitive to think that I possess (N) in virtue of deducing (N) from my knowledge of (G) as it is intuitive to think that I possess (F1) and (F2) in *Inattentive Perception* above. How could one possess facts when *inattentive* to them, but fail to possess them when *attentive* to them by having explicitly deduced them from one's knowledge?

We can capture this idea with a kind of closure principle for possession:

**Extended Possession.** Other things being equal, if *S* knows that *p* is entailed by something she knows, then *S* possesses the fact that *p* as a reason for a response.

In the case of my deduction of (N) from my knowledge of (G), Extended Possession implies that I possess (N) unless something odd is going on such that 'other things are not equal'. This is a wrinkle we needn't worry about with regard to the case at issue involving (G) and (N).<sup>12</sup>

Extended Possession and Explicit Deductive Updating cause problems for knowledge-centric theories of possession.  $(P \rightarrow K)$  is straightforwardly inconsistent with Extended Possession and Explicit Deductive Updating. This is because Extended Possession implies that in cases of Explicit Deductive Updating there are facts we possess before we believe them, and hence before we know them. Thus, there are facts we can possess without knowing them. So we have one more reason to reject  $(P \rightarrow K)$ .

Notice that Extended Possession and Explicit Deductive Updating don't immediately cause problems for  $(P \rightarrow PK)$ . Since  $(P \rightarrow PK)$  doesn't imply that believing or knowing that *p* is required for possessing *p*.  $(P \rightarrow PK)$  only says that being in a position to know that *p* is necessary. So the advocate of

<sup>12</sup> When are other things not equal? Plausibly, the same sorts of conditions that seem to compromise naive transmission and closure principles for justification will apply here. But those compromising conditions don't appear to apply in this kind of case and in most ordinary cases of deduction from knowledge. See Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.

( $P \rightarrow PK$ ) need only explain how one can possess reasons in cases of Explicit Deductive Updating before coming to know them.

Lord's (2018) discussion of ( $P \rightarrow PK$ ) on this point is admirably clear, and he explains it in terms of the following condition for being in a position to inferentially know:

it's possible to be in a position to know  $p$  when you don't believe [and thus don't know]  $p$ . In cases like this, what is it in virtue of which you are in a position to know  $p$ ? In the inferential cases, it's the fact that you have some beliefs with contents such that, if you could and did attend to those contents and inferentially form a belief that  $p$  in the right way, you would know  $p$ .

(Lord 2018: 92)

Put differently:

**Counterfactual Inferential Knowledge.** When  $S$  does not already know that  $p$ ,  $S$  is in a position to inferentially know that  $p$  iff  $S$  has some beliefs with contents such that, if  $S$  could and did attend to those contents and inferentially form a belief that  $p$  in the right way,  $S$  would know that  $p$ .

Since I can come by such knowledge after properly forming a belief in (N) on the basis of my knowledge of (G) and that (G) entails (N), I count as being in position to know (N) even before I believe it. Thus, ( $P \rightarrow PK$ ) allows me to possess (N) even before I come to know it. This is just what we need ( $P \rightarrow PK$ ) to do if it is to remain consistent with Extended Possession and Explicit Deductive Updating.

But there is trouble here. Counterfactual Inferential Knowledge yields too strict a theory of possession, one that turns out to be inconsistent with Extended Possession. Take the following possible scenario:

*Kripkean Study.* I'm part of a psychological experiment that is aimed at testing my responsiveness to my reasons as well as the extent to which I'm subject to the error of Kripkean dogmatism (though I do not know that this is what is being tested).<sup>13</sup> The psychologists test this by giving me new

<sup>13</sup> The Kripkean dogmatist, here, is someone who comes to know  $p$  on  $e$  at a time  $t$ , and at some future time believes  $p$  on  $e$  despite acquiring new evidence that defeats their knowledge and rational belief at that future time.

knowledge and then helping me realize new logical consequences of my new knowledge. So they give me some new non-misleading evidence *E* that actually enables me to come to know (*G*). Then they explain why (*G*) deductively entails (*N*). (Assume this deductive consequence was unknown to me before the study.) Since I'm rational this would ordinarily bring about a new belief in (*N*) on the basis of my knowledge that (*G*) and that (*G*) entails (*N*). But ever so quickly, as they intended, before I form my belief in (*N*) the psychologists give me a defeater for my original knowledge that (*G*). Specifically, just after helping me come to know that (*G*) entails (*N*) they very quickly and convincingly tell me a lie: that the original evidence I was relying on for (*G*) was all fabricated for the purposes of the experimental study and (*G*) is indeed false. (This is not true. The evidence is real and (*G*) is true.) Since I'm not a crazed Kripkean dogmatist and since I don't know that they're lying to me, I don't ignore what they tell me. Rather, I give up my belief in (*G*) and so cease to know (*G*).

For me and other possible participants in this type of study it will be false that: were I to form a belief in (*N*) in response to an explicit deduction from my knowledge of (*G*) and knowledge that (*G*) entails (*N*), I would know (*N*). This is due to the fact that the study is constructed in such a way that I'm supposed to be given a defeater for (*G*) before I have a chance to believe (*N*). So if the study is reliably executed, then it is false that I would come to know (*N*). There are just too many nearby worlds where I get the defeater before I come to believe and know (*G*), and the actual world is one such world. So according to Counterfactual Inferential Knowledge I am not in a position to know (*N*).

The point here is that Kripkean Study is a possible situation. About this possible situation ( $P \rightarrow PK$ ) and Counterfactual Inferential Knowledge together imply that in such a case I do not possess (*N*). But that is inconsistent with Extended Possession. For there is some small amount of time where I know (*G*) and know that (*G*) entails (*N*)—it is the short amount of time it takes for the psychologists to give me the defeater for my belief and knowledge of (*G*). So Extended Possession, ( $P \rightarrow PK$ ), and Counterfactual Inferential Knowledge form an inconsistent set.

Some advocates of ( $P \rightarrow PK$ ) might seek to undermine the objection arising from Kripkean Study by undermining the idea that (*N*), while a fact in Kripkean Study, is not a fact that can function as a reason for me. Recall that possessing the fact that *p* as a reason to respond in some way requires

that I be able to respond to  $p$  in some way. Perhaps it is not clear just what responses are available to me if I am going to be given a defeater so quickly. But it takes only a moment to appreciate that even in Kripkean Study I can possess (N) as a reason *to update* my beliefs or at least as a reason *to begin to update* my beliefs so that I give up or begin to give up my non-belief in (N). This will involve me becoming increasingly confident in (N) and forming the dispositions to act and think on (N) in the ways characteristic of belief. Beginning to update my beliefs in these ways is clearly consistent with being given a defeater before that update process is completed.

Perhaps advocates of  $(P \rightarrow PK)$  might seek to undermine the objection arising from Kripkean Study by seeking to refine Counterfactual Inferential Knowledge so that these problems do not arise. For example, one could do away with the counterfactual aspect of Counterfactual Knowledge and thus do away with its implicit constraint that I possess only those reasons that I would know in all nearby worlds, i.e. in circumstances not importantly different from one's actual circumstances.

But this is a very attractive feature of Counterfactual Knowledge. For ordinary ways of thinking and talking about being in a position to know that are of normative significance for deliberation do not seem to track the weaker notion of it being possible to know in circumstances that may be importantly different from one's actual circumstances. In the present case, the important difference will involve the psychologists not giving me a defeater despite my participating in study where they intend to give me a defeater. The primary worry to have about weakening the target concept of being in a position to know in this way concerns the normative significance of what goes on in increasingly distant worlds. For, by definition, the reasons I possess are the facts that I have access to in my actual situation and they are facts that call for responses *in my actual situation*. Why should possible knowledge in non-actual, increasingly distant worlds have an impact on what I should do or think or feel in the actual world?

#### 6.4.2 Cases of Self-Defeat

Kripkean Study is a *contingent* case where one's inferential awareness of the fact that  $p$  provides one access to  $p$  while one fails to be in a position to know that  $p$ . The cases of inferential awareness involving self-defeating beliefs from Chapter 4, Section 4.3.2 are cases where this occurs of *necessity*. For there we saw that there are circumstances where one can be inferentially

aware of the fact that  $p$  even though one could not know that  $p$  because believing  $p$  ensured that  $p$  is false. In such cases the following two conditions were satisfied:

- (i)  $S$  knows that:  $q$ , and  $q$  entails  $p$ .
- (ii)  $S$  knows that:  $p$  is true iff  $S$  does not believe that  $p$ .

In those cases, the first condition afforded one inferential awareness of the fact that  $p$ , while the self-defeat condition ensured that one *could not* truly or justifiedly believe  $p$ , thus making it impossible for one to know it. Just as in Kripkean Study, one's inferential awareness of  $p$  in this kind of case can give one access to  $p$  as a reason for various responses. For example, one's access to  $p$  gives one reason not to assign too low a credence to  $p$ . For another example, it gives one reason to place a bet on  $p$ . So while one's access to  $p$  in such cases cannot give one reason *to believe*  $p$ , it can give one reason to respond in other ways.

The upshot of this and the previous section is that there are cases of inferential awareness that afford agents access to reasons, but do not put an agent in a position to know them. The result being that neither  $(P \rightarrow K)$  nor  $(P \rightarrow PK)$  gives us the correct account of possession.

### 6.4.3 Environmental Luck

The epistemology literature stands strongly in favour of the idea that cases of environmental luck are Gettier cases.<sup>14</sup> If that is correct then, by definition, cases of environmental luck are cases of *justified* true belief that fail to be cases of knowledge. Take, then, a standard fake barn case where one's broader region is filled with fake barns but one is looking at a real barn. When one is looking at a real barn it is plausible not only that they are aware of the fact that a barn is nearby (Chapter 4, Section 4.2.4, cf. Chapter 9, Section 9.4.3) it is also plausible that one possesses that fact as a reason for various responses. For example, it gives one a reason to run in the direction of the barn if in need of shelter, it gives one a reason to place a substantial bet on the claim that the object one's looking at is a barn, it is a

<sup>14</sup> We will return to this in Chapters 8 and 9.

reason to believe that barn-related supplies are inside the object one's looking at, and so forth.

Suppose, then, that while in fake barn country and aware of the fact that one is looking at a barn one responded by coming to believe that: the object one is looking at is a farm building. Wouldn't one be (propositionally and doxastically) justified in holding that further belief? It is very intuitive to think that one's belief would be so justified. Indeed, in taking cases of environmental luck to be Gettier cases it is assumed that these are cases of justified belief. But if it is justified one must possess reasons that justify the belief. What are one's reasons? Doubtless if we were in such a situation and we were asked to cite our reasons that justify our belief as well as explain why we hold our belief we would respond by citing the fact that: the object I'm looking at is a barn and barns are farm buildings. Taking such judgments at face value implies that we can possess reasons when aware of them in cases of environmental luck.

Accordingly, we have evidence for two theses:

**No Environmentally Lucky Knowledge.** Cases of environmental luck are cases where one has a justified true belief that  $p$ , lacks knowledge that  $p$ , and is also not in a position to know that  $p$ .

**Environmentally Lucky Possession.** Cases of environmental luck are cases where one has a justified true belief that  $p$  and, despite being unable to know that  $p$ , one has  $p$  as a reason for performing actions and forming attitudes.

If these two claims are true, then  $(P \rightarrow PK)$  and  $(P \rightarrow K)$  are false.

## 6.5 Awareness and the Possession of Reasons

Having distinguished factual awareness from knowledge and being in a position to know, we can appreciate alternative theories of possession that are anchored in factual awareness rather than knowledge:

**Possession Requires Factual Awareness ( $P \rightarrow A$ ).** Necessarily,  $S$  possesses the fact that  $p$  as a reason to  $F$  only if  $S$  is aware of the fact that  $p$ .

**Possession Requires Potential Factual Awareness ( $P \rightarrow PA$ ).** Necessarily,  $S$  possesses the fact that  $p$  as a reason to  $F$  only if  $S$  is in a position to be aware of the fact that  $p$ .

Which are we to prefer? Recall that Lord-style cases of inattention undermined  $(P \rightarrow K)$ . They also seem to undermine  $(P \rightarrow A)$ . For in such cases one is not (or need not be) aware of the fact that  $p$  for  $p$  to have normative significance. In the example Inattentive Perception above, one's visual awareness of my carpet put one in a position to be aware of the following facts: (F1) that each determinate colour in each square occurs exactly four times, and (F2) that there are two determinate shades of blue. Access to these facts explained why one's failure to believe the following was unjustified: that there are more (determinable) blue squares than any other coloured square. But because one was distracted one never actually became aware of (F1) and (F2), one was merely in a position to become aware of those facts. To the extent that this case threatened  $(P \rightarrow K)$  it seems to also threaten  $(P \rightarrow A)$ . For this reason, I will prefer  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  in what follows.<sup>15</sup>

$(P \rightarrow PK)$  and  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  are very much alike. Both are epistemically demanding views of possession in so far as both knowledge and factual awareness are robust epistemic relations to facts. Both are views that do not require belief, and both are factive views. So in this respect the two views of possession are on a par. Similarly, both appeal to natural epistemic relations. After all, knowledge is a non-ad hoc explanatorily rich relation we can stand in to facts. Since factual awareness is the genus of knowledge and has other instances (seeing that  $p$ , remembering that  $p$ , etc.) it seems like these other instances will have just as much a claim to being non-ad hoc explanatorily rich relations we can stand in to facts.<sup>16</sup>

Further  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  is just as capable as  $(P \rightarrow PK)$  when it comes to explaining the possession of (F1) and (F2) in Inattentive Perception. For given that knowledge is a species of factual awareness two entailments follow: knowing that  $p$  entails being aware of the fact that  $p$ , and being in a position to know  $p$  entails being in a position to be aware of the fact that  $p$ . So the fact that one is in a position to know (F1) and (F2) while inattentive ensures that one is also in a position to be aware of (F1) and (F2) while inattentive. So the

<sup>15</sup> But it should be noted that the more liberal one's theory of representation happens to be the harder it will become to leverage cases of inattention against  $(P \rightarrow A)$ . For example, if the perceptual experience of objects can have relatively high-level propositional content then arguably my visual awareness of *the carpet* (an object) is constituted by the representation of the propositions (F1) and (F2). So *this* inattention argument against  $(P \rightarrow A)$  rides on certain assumptions. But at some point the enrichment of perceptual content must stop and inference from that content will begin. It is at this point where the argument from inattention will resurface and threaten  $(P \rightarrow A)$ .

<sup>16</sup> See Lord (2018: 94–5) for more on the relevance of naturalness in deciding on a theory of possession.



explanatory power of  $(P \rightarrow PK)$  to handle cases of inattention is completely carried over to  $(P \rightarrow PA)$ .

Additionally, it is easy to see how  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  can explain why Agnes does not possess the fact that her brother is graduating. For factual awareness is a matter of *non-accidental* true representation. On any plausible view of the non-accidentality requirement on factual awareness Agnes fails to stand in a non-accidental relation to the fact that her brother is graduating in virtue of being in the experience machine.

To make this more concrete take the following safety and virtue-theoretic accounts of the non-accidentality requirement on awareness:

(SafeA) Necessarily, *S* is aware of the fact that *p* iff *S* is in a representational state *r* which truly represents the fact that *p* and *S*'s representation that *p* could not have easily been false.

(VirtueA) Necessarily, *S* is aware of the fact that *p* iff *S* is in a representational state *r* which truly represents the fact that *p*, and *S*'s true representation that *p* is owed to *S*'s non-defective exercise of her sufficiently reliable cognitive abilities.

On (SafeA) Agnes' failure to possess the fact that her brother is graduating as a reason will be explained by the fact that Agnes doesn't safely represent that fact because the experience machine scenario guarantees that she could easily have falsely represented otherwise. For the experience machine is unreliable, and even though it is accurate in this case there remain many nearby worlds where the machine feeds Agnes a different experience, or that same experience just before or just after her brother is graduating.

On (VirtueA) Agnes' failure to possess the fact that her brother is graduating as a reason will be explained by the fact that Agnes has no reliable cognitive ability she could *non-defectively* exercise to arrive at a representation of the fact that her brother is graduating while in the experience machine. This is because her visual representation-forming abilities are not abilities relative to the situation that she is actually in within the experience machine. So while she may *exercise* a reliable ability in arriving at her belief, her failure to exercise that ability relative to the circumstances in which it is a reliable ability prevents her from being non-accidentally related to the fact at issue.

So on both (SafeA) and (VirtueA) Agnes is not simply unaware of the fact that her brother is graduating, she is also not in a position to be aware of that fact. So  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  can easily be used to explain why Agnes fails to possess the target fact. Accordingly,  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  can explain why Agnes does

not possess the fact that her brother is graduating, and  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  can also explain why one does possess (F1) and (F2) in Inattentive Perception. So  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  is on an explanatory par with both  $(P \rightarrow K)$  and  $(P \rightarrow PK)$  in regard to these cases. But  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  can also do better as we'll see in the next sections.

But first we should say something about being in a position to be aware. For when one is not actually aware of the fact that  $p$ , when is one in a position to be aware of the fact that  $p$ ? To outline such a notion we need only take the conditions described by Lord (2018: 92) for inferential and non-inferential cases of being in a position to know and generalize from knowledge to awareness:

**Counterfactual Inferential Awareness.** When  $S$  is not already aware of the fact that  $p$ ,  $S$  is in a position to be inferentially aware of the fact that  $p$  iff  $S$  hosts some representational states with contents such that, if  $S$  could and did attend to those contents and inferentially form a representation that  $p$  in the right way,  $S$  would be aware of the fact that  $p$ .

**Counterfactual Non-Inferential Awareness.** When  $S$  is not already aware of the fact that  $p$ ,  $S$  is in a position to be non-inferentially aware of the fact that  $p$  iff  $S$  has some experiences such that, if  $S$  could and did attend to certain features of those experiences and non-inferentially form a representation that  $p$  in the right kind of way, then  $S$  would be aware of the fact that  $p$ .

Against these counterfactual conditions someone may try to produce a hybrid counterexample by bringing together Kripkean Study and Inattentive Perception. This might be a case where, while you are actually inattentive to (F1) and (F2) while looking at my carpet, I stand poised to quickly deliver a defeater for (F1) and (F2) if I get even a whiff of you thinking too much about the carpet. For example, perhaps I've even planted coloured lights above the carpet and I'm prepared to tell you some nonsense about carpet squares being illuminated by blue lights in order to teach my family about undercutting defeaters.

The trouble with this style of objection is that being aware of the facts (F1) and (F2) doesn't require that it be rational to believe them. This is just one of the ways that knowledge and awareness differ. Further, one can be aware of a fact  $p$  even if one is unable to be aware that one is aware of the fact  $p$ . It seems to me that these are the lessons to draw from this hybrid case, not that there is some fault with the theses above.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> A related observation is made below in connection with lottery cases.

### 6.5.1 Explicit Deductive Updates and Self-Defeat

We saw three objections to  $(P \rightarrow PK)$  and  $(P \rightarrow K)$  above: one from explicit deductive updates, one from cases of self-defeat, and one from cases of environmental luck. These were cases where agents possess facts despite failing to be in a position to know them.  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  can avoid these difficulties because it is a more permissive way of being non-accidentally related to facts.

First,  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  nimbly avoids the problem raised by the application of Extended Possession to Kripkean Study because  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  can easily explain the fact that I possess (N) before being given a defeater in the psychological study. This is because  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  doesn't make the potential for knowledge in all (most, many) nearby worlds a requirement for possession. Rather, all that is required is that one be in a position to be aware of the fact that (N). And in Kripkean Study I am not merely in a position to be aware of the fact that (N) before being given the defeater, I am actually aware of the fact that (N) before I am given the defeater. Recall, awareness is a matter of standing in a suitably non-accidental true representation to a fact. While I don't represent (N) *by believing (N)*, there are at least two ways I might represent (N) without believing (N) in Kripkean Study. First, as discussed in Chapter 2 many epistemologists think that seeming states are representational propositional attitudes that are distinct from belief. Thus, (N) can still be the content of a seeming state even if I don't believe it. Perhaps (N) seems true in virtue of (N) being a newly appreciated logical entailment of (G) in Kripkean Study. This would be a case of direct representation of (N) because (N) is the propositional content of the seeming state.

But we needn't rely on seemings here. For in Kripkean Study I believe (G) and believe that (G) entails (N) before coming to believe (N). As discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.6, I here *indirectly represent* (N) as being true in virtue of the fact that I'm a competent deductive reasoner who believes (G) and believes that (G) entails (N) and who also competently deduced (N) from those beliefs. Accordingly, so long as my indirect representation of (N) is non-accidental in the way required for awareness I count as being aware of the fact that (N). In the circumstances of Kripkean Study it is non-accidental in that way. For I *know* (G) prior to being given defeaters, and I also *know* that (G) entails (N), and I am a competent deductive reasoner who non-defectively exercises that competence in deducing (N) from (G). Accordingly, I can be inferentially aware of the fact that (N) even before I believe it.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> It is easy to see how (VirtueA) delivers awareness of (N) in this case. For knowing (G) and knowing that (G) entails (N) while being a competent deductive reasoner ensures that my

This explanation as to how I can possess (N) according to  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  in Kripkean Study also applies to the cases of self-defeat. For the only relevant difference between Kripkean Study and those cases is the necessity of my inability to know the entailments of my knowledge due to the impossibility of truly believing those entailments.

### 6.5.2 Environmental Luck

Above we saw that treating cases of environmental luck as Gettier cases supported the following two theses:

**No Environmentally Lucky Knowledge.** Cases of environmental luck are cases where one has a justified true belief that  $p$ , lacks knowledge that  $p$ , and is also not in a position to know that  $p$ .

**Environmentally Lucky Possession.** Cases of environmental luck are cases where one has a justified true belief that  $p$  and, despite being unable to know that  $p$ , one has  $p$  as a reason for performing actions and forming attitudes.

This is a problem for advocates of  $(P \rightarrow K)$  and  $(P \rightarrow PK)$ .

This is not a problem for  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  as it is silent on the question of environmental luck. However, it is a problem for the conjunction of  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  with any theory of factual awareness that rules out factual awareness in cases of environmental luck. (SafeA) is one such theory. Accordingly, the plausibility of Environmentally Lucky Possession undermines (SafeA) as a theory of factual awareness, and provides support for (VirtueA) and any other theory of factual awareness that can explain the possession of reasons in cases of environmental luck. Theories of factual awareness will be picked up again in Chapter 9.

indirect representation of (N) is from a conditionally reliable competence to indirectly represent facts—that is, it is reliable conditional on the truth of the premises. Perhaps it is less obvious how (SafeA) could deliver awareness of (N). To see this notice that my indirect representation of (N) counts as safe in a sufficiently relevant sense. For before I've been given the defeater for (G) I know (G) and I know that (G) entails (N). Thus if knowledge requires safety, my beliefs in these premises will be safe. So an indirect representation of (N) will count as derivatively safe when it is constituted by a safe belief in both (G) and (G) entails (N), when one is a competent deductive reasoner. So even on this modally more demanding view of awareness, (SafeA),  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  can explain the reasons one possesses in cases like Kripkean Study.

To conclude, in this section we've seen that identifying possession in some way with the more general state of factual awareness can explain the facts we possess in cases of environmental luck, in cases where we have conclusive evidence for self-defeating propositions, and in cases involving explicit deductive belief-updating procedures. In contrast, knowledge-centric accounts of possession cannot explain the facts we possess in such cases.

## 6.6 The Lottery Problem

Environmentally Lucky Possession forces us to give up on knowledge-centric theories of possession and to adopt a more permissive theory of possession in terms of factual awareness. Lottery cases threaten this. To see the problem take a standard lottery case:

*Lottery.* You have a ticket for a fair lottery with very long odds. The lottery has been drawn, although you have not heard the result yet. Reflecting on the odds involved you conclude (L) that your ticket is a loser. Besides your competent assessment of the odds, you have no other reason to think your ticket is a loser. As it turns out, your belief that you own a losing ticket is true.

A common judgment among epistemologists is that (L) cannot be known on statistical evidence alone.<sup>19</sup> That is, while many allow that a belief in (L) could enjoy a significant degree of evidential support, many want to resist the idea that one could ever have *sufficient* reason to believe (L). This seems like a problem for (P→PA) if it is taken together with a theory of factual awareness like (VirtueA). For (P→PA) and (VirtueA) allow for the *possibility* that agents can have sufficient reason to believe (L).

But this should not be too troubling. For such a theory of possession and factual awareness *does not* imply that *mature and reflective agents* in lottery cases can have sufficient reason to believe (L). The reason for this is that if, despite one's statistical evidence that favours the truth of (L), one has further undefeated reason to think that they are not in position to know (L) then one will not have sufficient reason to believe (L). For being in a position to

<sup>19</sup> Nelkin (2000), Williamson (2000), Hawthorne (2003), and Pritchard (2005).

know (L) requires that one's over-all circumstances are hospitable to knowledge. Thus, if one has sufficient reason to think that their circumstances prohibit them from being in a position to know (L), then one has the kind of information that, intuitively, ensures that one lacks sufficient reason to believe (L).<sup>20</sup> Put differently, having sufficient reason to believe that one is not in a position to know  $p$  defeats one's justification to believe  $p$ , and this is just what happens to mature reflective agents in lottery cases.

How is it that mature agents come to have sufficient reason to think that they're not in a position to know (L)? It is exceedingly common for such agents to flag the modal defect with lottery propositions like (L) by appreciating *that their ticket might be a winner*—i.e. (L) might be false—and by concluding from that fact that they are unable to know (L). So provided one cannot have sufficient reason to believe (L) if one has sufficient reason to believe one's not in a position to know (L), it will follow that one lacks sufficient reason to believe (L) despite its strong statistical support.<sup>21</sup>

Notice that the conclusion is not that one lacks *any* reason to believe (L). One's statistical evidence really does give one *strong* reason to believe (L). Rather, the claim is that in lottery cases where one has sufficient reason to think they are not in a position to know (L) one lacks *sufficient* reason to believe (L). So while  $(P \rightarrow PA)$  and (VirtueA) don't rule out the possibility of possessing (L), mature reflective thinkers will typically possess further reasons that prevent them from having sufficient reason to believe (L).

## 6.7 A Theory of Possession

There is, arguably, more to possessing facts as reasons than standing in a suitable epistemic relation to those facts. This has been brought out through reflection on various cases:

*Logic.* Suppose the fact that  $p$  is a reason to believe that  $q$ . If possession consisted in [epistemic] access to the reason-giving fact, it would follow

<sup>20</sup> Compare Smithies (2012) and Smith (2021).

<sup>21</sup> The conclusion here is quite similar to the conclusion of Chapter 4, Section 4.2.3, where misleading information prevents one from visually knowing that  $p$  because it prevents one from justifiably believing that  $p$  despite the fact that one is visually aware of the fact that  $p$ . The main difference is that in lottery cases we have an indirect representation of the fact that (L), and so another case of indirect factual awareness without knowledge. Except here the indirect factual awareness cannot rise to knowledge for two reasons: it is a case of luck and it is a case where belief is irrational.

that having access to the fact that  $p$  would be sufficient for having a reason to believe  $q$ . But one might not be attuned to the relation of support between  $p$  and the belief that  $q$ , or have the ability to become attuned to it. Suppose  $q$  follows from  $p$  only via an incredibly difficult proof none of us can do. Even if one has [epistemic] access to the fact that  $p$ , one doesn't *ipso facto* have a reason to believe  $q$ . (Sylvan 2018: 214–15)

*Fish.* Lois just ordered fish from her favorite seafood restaurant. Right before she digs in, the waiter comes out to inform her that the fish contains salmonella. Lois has the unfortunate belief that salmonella is one of the many bacteria found in food that is harmless to humans. And, indeed, this belief is rational. A renowned food scientist told her so. So she goes ahead and forms an intention to eat the fish and eats the fish. . . . But Lois is rational to eat. So it's plausible that [the fact that her fish contains salmonella] doesn't affect the rational merits of not eating despite the fact that Lois meets the epistemic condition for possession. (Lord 2018: 98–9)

The point we are invited to draw out of these cases is that possessing a fact as a reason for a response  $F$  requires more than having cognitive purchase on the target fact. One must also have some practical purchase on the way a fact has a bearing on  $F$ -ing.<sup>22</sup> For example, Sylvan (2018: 215) argues that the relevant relation needed for one to possess a fact that  $p$  as a reason to  $F$  involves having a *competence (reliable ability) to treat* facts like  $p$  as reasons for responses like  $F$ -ing. Lord (2018: Chapter 4) argues that it is a matter of *knowing how* to use facts like  $p$  as reasons for responses like  $F$ -ing.

We will sometimes have reason to rely on a complete account of possession. As many have found cases such as Logic and Fish compelling, for the purposes of this book we'll rely on the following:

**Possession as Functional Factual Awareness (PFA).** Necessarily,  $S$  possesses the fact that  $p$  as a reason for a response  $F$  iff  $S$  is in a position to be aware of the fact that  $p$ , and  $S$  is reliably able to use  $p$  as a reason for  $F$ -ing.

The phrase 'is reliably able to use' can be interpreted or replaced as readers like. If one thinks an unreliable ability to use  $p$  is enough for possessing a fact  $p$  as a reason to  $F$  that's fine. If one thinks possession should be

<sup>22</sup> Whiting (2014), Sylvan (2015, 2018), Littlejohn (2017), and Lord (2018: Chapter 4).

understood in terms of know-how that's fine too. Nothing will turn on these issues in what follows so long as one's theory of the practical condition does not require knowledge or being in a position to know.

While I'm here conceding much to those who advocate a practical condition on possession, it's worth noting opposition. Suppose that the relevant agent shouldn't *F* but is motivated to do so either because they suffer from a deeply misguided moral outlook (ancient slaveholders) or because of some mistaken factual beliefs or ignorance of relevant facts. Now, it's clearly true that *ancient slaveholders shouldn't have been selling people*. But how can I recover this judgment if the slaveholders needed to be aware of a reason, *p*, that's a sufficient reason to refrain from doing these things *and* they need to be reliably able to use *p* as a reason to refrain? For such people could well not be able to reliably use *p* to refrain (cf. Littlejohn 2014).<sup>23</sup>

Various responses are available. One response is bullet-biting. Another response is to finesse the set of worlds relative to which one counts as having the reliable ability so that it doesn't depend overly much on one's actual psychological state. For example, just as being in a snowstorm or being overly tired will render one unable to hit baseballs *in one's actual and in nearby circumstances*, one can still have the ability to hit baseballs if one can reliably enough hit them in normal bodily and environmental conditions for hitting. The idea, then, is that the envisioned slave holders have the relevant ability, but are ill-placed to manifest it. Another response to this is to back off from *reliable abilities* to *F* for the reason that *p* to a mere *capacity* to *F* for the reason that *p*, which only requires that one *can F* for the reason that *p*. Yet another response is to insist on a distinction between *what there is* most reason to do and *what one has* most reason to do, and then to deny that an agent always has most reason to do what there is most reason to do. I myself am not wholly averse to a concessive response which rejects any thick practical constraint on possessing reasons and thus takes possession to be a purely epistemic relation. For the purposes of this book little should turn on one's view of the practical condition on possession.

<sup>23</sup> Thanks to an Oxford reader for pointing this out to me.