

Arturs Logins

Knowledge, Practice, and Merit

Abstract

In this paper I discuss the role that knowledge plays with regard to rational action. It has been recently argued that knowledge determines appropriate action. I examine this proposal, consider objections against it, and finally propose a defense of it.

1. Introduction

In contemporary philosophical research (of at least few decades or so) knowledge and (rational) action have been largely taken to be substantially unrelated. On the one hand, it has been assumed that, as a central part of epistemology, there are theoretical questions about possibility, nature, kind, fallibility, possibility of definition, characterization, etc of knowledge. On the other hand, supposedly, there are essentially different issues raised in the framework of Bayesian Decision theory, i.e. questions about the correct characterization of (rational) action where only subjective credences, not knowledge, play a role.¹ In the recent past, however, such a division of labor has been strongly challenged.² As a result, the question of the links between knowledge and rational action has become one of the most popular issues in current mainstream epistemology.

One recent influential attempt to link knowledge and action can be found in the work of John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008). Briefly, according to Hawthorne and Stanley, in the relevant decision situation, it is appropriate for a person to treat a proposition as a reason for acting when she knows that proposition.

This view, however, has not been unanimously accepted by the philosophical community. A number of important objections have been raised against Hawthorne and Stanley's account. Given these challenges, many have adop-

¹ As, for example, in Kaplan (1996).

² Attacks against approaches of this kind have come recently from various sides and have not always been discussed on the same grounds. See for example, Fantl and McGrath (2002, 2009), Stanley and Hawthorne (2008), Stanley (2005), Hawthorne (2004), Gibbons (2001), Hyman (1999), Williamson (2005).

ted more traditional views concerning knowledge and action – that is, views that do not postulate an essential link between them.

The aim of this paper is to consider whether Hawthorne and Stanley's view can be saved from such criticisms. I start by describing in greater detail their position. Then I detail the main objections to their principle. Finally, I propose a solution to what have been seen as the main problems of Hawthorne and Stanley's principle.

2. *The Reason-Knowledge Principle*

The *Reason-Knowledge Principle* proposed by Hawthorne and Stanley to characterize the link between knowledge and action has been stated in the following way:

The Reason-Knowledge Principle (RKP): Where one's choice is p -dependent,³ it is appropriate to treat the proposition that p as a reason for acting iff you know that p . (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, p. 578)⁴

³ The notion of p -dependency is defined in the following way: "Let us say that a choice between options $x_1 \dots x_n$ is p -dependent iff the most preferable of $x_1 \dots x_n$ conditional on the proposition that p is not the same as the most preferable of $x_1 \dots x_n$ conditional on the proposition that *not*- p . For p -dependent choices, it seems highly intuitive that knowledge that p makes it appropriate to treat p as a reason for action" (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, p. 578).

⁴ Notice also that the first sentence of Hawthorne and Stanley's paper is the question, "What is the relation between knowledge and action?" (*ibid.*, p. 571), but their ultimate answer to this question is delineated as a principle about "treating the proposition that p as a reason for acting". This might appear puzzling. The answer to this apparent confusion is that Hawthorne and Stanley are interested in the normative role of knowledge in action. They are stating a principle about the normativity of action (the normativity from the epistemic point of view, not the practical normativity), and hence they are evaluating the question of what makes a proposition epistemically appropriate as one's reason for acting. They claim that knowledge and only knowledge of the proposition is what makes it appropriate for the subject to act on that proposition (where the action depends on that proposition). Thus, they write, "Hyman and Unger are defending the claim that something is a reason for you only if it is known. They do not defend the additional normative principle that something is appropriately treated as a reason only if it is a reason in their sense. The later is what we are defending" (*ibid.*, p. 571n7). And this is a question of epistemic normativity, because it concerns our "appreciation" of reasons for action, i.e. something that seems to pertain to the epistemic domain. Thus, "[w]e are in no means opposed to a perspective according to which claims of practical rationality – and in particular what one ought to do – are grounded in a decision theory of the sort we have gestured at. But the need to integrate such a theory with reasons for action is still vital. For one thing, there are cases where one does what one ought to do but for the wrong reasons, and this phenomenon needs explanation. More generally we need to distinguish between the existence of a reason for acting and appreciating that reason in such a way as to make it *your* reason for

It is important to notice that Hawthorne and Stanley put their principle in terms of appropriateness. Furthermore, they take appropriateness to be understood as permissibility. They believe that their principle needs to be described in terms of appropriateness (understood as permissibility) because requiring an obligation here would be too demanding:

Our principle concerns what is *appropriate* to treat as a reason for action, rather than what one *ought* to treat as a reason for action. It would be overly demanding to require someone to treat *all* of their relevant knowledge as reasons for each action undertaken. The principle is therefore a claim about what is permissible to treat as reasons for action in a given choice situation. (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, p. 578)

Unfortunately, it is not entirely clear in what sense it would be too demanding to require rather than just to allow one to treat all of one's *relevant* knowledge as reasons for each action. Is the problem that we never act (we are unable to act) on all of our relevant knowledge in a given situation and hence it would be senseless to require something that we never (could) do? But in such a case, to merely allow one to act seems to be equally bad. Perhaps the idea is that obligation comes with many duties, whereas permissibility does not imply duties other than refraining from doing what is impermissible? I suspect that putting a principle about the link between treating *p* as a reason for action and knowledge in terms of obligation could enable Hawthorne and Stanley to prevent some of the objections against their principle. This path is not pursued in this paper, however. To explore the idea of putting the RKP in terms of obligation would take us too far. We would need to determine whether the *p*-dependency of a particular action can be used to exclude part of the subject's total knowledge from the propositions on which one ought to act. This would require a much more substantial inquiry that is beyond the scope of the present work. Furthermore, as is explored below, we do not need to translate the RKP in terms of obligations in order to rebut the objections against it, as another, less revisionary approach is sufficient.

The central question, however, is why we should think that the RKP is correct. Hawthorne and Stanley have discussed a variety of ordinary cases that apparently count in its favor. In these cases, they suggest, the ordinary way to evaluate the behavior of the subjects involved is to make reference to the possession or absence of knowledge and not to the possession or absence of justified belief or other states. The RKP, they argue, manages to make sense of our appraisal of behavior in ordinary cases better than any principle

action. . . . As we are thinking about things, it is knowledge that constitutes the relevant sort of appreciation that converts the mere existence of a reason into a personal reason" (*ibid.*, p. 580).

linking rational action to justified belief. Here are some cases which, according to Hawthorne and Stanley, support the RKP:

(RESTAURANT)

Suppose for example, that Hannah and Sarah are trying to find a restaurant, at which they have time-limited reservations. Instead of asking someone for directions, Hannah goes on her hunch that the restaurant is down a street on the left. After walking for some amount of time, it becomes quite clear that they went down the wrong street. A natural way for Sarah to point out that Hannah made the wrong decision is to say, “You shouldn’t have gone down this street, since you did not know that the restaurant was there”. (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, p. 571)

(DOG AND NEEDLE)

If a parent allows a child to play near a dog and does not know whether the dog would bite the child, and if a doctor uses a needle that he did not know to be safe, then they are *prima facie* negligent. Neither the parent nor doctor will get off the hook by pointing out that the dog did not in fact bite the child and the needle turned out to be safe, nor by pointing out that they were very confident that the dog/needle was safe. (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, pp. 572-573)

(MARRIAGE)

[S]uppose Hannah’s husband Mordechai has gone off to war, and goes missing for many years. Hannah remarries after waiting five years, reasonably assuming her husband to be dead. After reemerging from captivity, Mordechai might legitimately complain to Hannah that she should not have remarried without knowing that he had died. It is reasonable for Mordechai not to be satisfied with the excuse that Hannah had a justified belief that he was dead. (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, p. 573)

What these cases of folk appraisal of action supposedly demonstrate is that if a subject’s action (based on some relevant proposition p – a part of an underlying practical reasoning) is in some sense subject to reasonable criticism (from an epistemic point of view), then the right explanation of this negative appraisal is that the subject did not act on knowledge; in other words, she did not know the relevant proposition p , which she had treated as a reason for acting. By contraposition, if someone acts on what she knows, then her action is positively valuable or blameless (from the epistemic point of view). These facts about folk appraisal seem to speak in favor of a principle linking rational action to knowledge. It seems then that the RKP gives the best explanation of what makes an action rational: properly specified, knowledge of a relevant proposition is both sufficient and necessary for appropriate action.

3. *Objections against the Knowledge Norm*

Given its revolutionary character, it is not surprising that the RKP has already received a massive amount of criticism and counterexamples. Two main objections have been raised against it. On the one hand it has been argued that knowledge is not sufficient for rational action.⁵ On the other hand it has been argued that knowledge is not necessary for rational action.⁶

The objection against the condition of sufficiency is based on the idea that there are situations in which a person would be reasonably criticized for performing an action, even if she knew the proposition on which she acted. Jessica Brown (2008) has proposed the very influential case of a senior surgeon who has to check the data of a patient once more before an operation even if she already knows all the relevant information (that the disease is in the patient's left kidney). If she did not verify this information, she would be acting in a way that we could reasonably criticize. It seems that in this case a subject knows a proposition (that the disease is in the patient's left kidney) but it would not be appropriate to treat it as a reason for acting. Something more seems to be needed; mere knowledge of that proposition is not sufficient. Hence, it seems that the RKP norm is not the correct one (similar counterexamples have been proposed by Baron Reed (2010) and Jennifer Lackey (2010)).

However, it seems that such counterexamples miss the point and hence are no threat to the RKP. Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa (2012) has forcefully demonstrated that Brown's case and similar cases do not establish anything against the RKP, or against any other principle linking action and knowledge, because given the description in the example, it is not shown that the relevant link (which Ichikawa calls "rationalization") between reasons and action is established in these situations. But if this is so, then what the subject knows in the example is not her (sufficient) *reason* for acting. According to Ichikawa:

The knowledge norm says that a proposition *p* is held as a reason if and only if it is known, but it is silent on the extent of the rationalizing relation. . . . [F]or all Brown has said, it may be that the proposition that the disease is in the left kidney doesn't rationalize operating without first checking the chart.

Where the rationalization relation is to be understood in the following way:

⁵ See for example Brown (2008), Neta (2009), Lackey (2010), Reed (2010).

⁶ See for example Brown (2008), Neta (2009), Littlejohn (2009), Gerken (2011), Smithies (2012).

Proposition p rationalizes action A if and only if p would, if held as a reason, be a sufficient reason for performing A . (Ichikawa 2012, p. 52)

In other words, it might be the case (the example does not prove the contrary) that without the final checking of the chart, the surgeon does not have a sufficient reason to perform the operation. To know that the left kidney is the diseased one seems to be insufficient for rationalizing its removal. What exactly is needed for rationalizing the action is not clearly stated in Brown's surgeon case. It seems that the proposition "that the patient's data were double checked just before operating" is clearly among the reasons that are needed in order to justify the operation. Perhaps even other propositions are relevant, such as "This patient is the same person that the surgeon checked in the morning", or "The patient's disease could not have been cured in the time between the morning check and the operation", etc. In every case, it seems that Brown's and other similar examples do not manage to refute the sufficiency condition of the RKP. Therefore, unless a case can be shown in which the rationalization relation is in place, and knowledge of the relevant propositions (of those who rationalize the action) is still not sufficient for the action to be rational, we can conclude that the RKP is not refuted by these kinds of counterexamples. Hence, in the remainder of this section we will focus on the objection against the necessary condition, leaving aside the criticism of the condition of sufficiency.

Most of the objections against the necessary condition of knowledge for rational action are based on (or at least illustrated by) some plausible ordinary cases. Two types of cases have been proposed: cases of action based upon a false but justified belief, and cases of action in Gettier-type situations. Here are two such examples:

(MARRIAGE 2. MORDECHAI'S UNEXPECTED RETURN)

Let us instead consider a version of the case [cf. (MARRIAGE) above] in which Hannah is extremely well-warranted, her deciding whether to marry is urgent and the stakes are lower. Assume that the military has informed her that the enemy does not take any prisoners. Assume, moreover, that Hannah has learned that no soldier who has been missing in action has reemerged. Assume that Hannah has contacted the surviving members of Mordechai's squad and that they all described his disappearance in such a way that his death seems like the only viable explanation. Assume that Hannah and Mordechai have discussed the risks of war and agreed that she has to remarry if he were to die. Assume, finally, that practicalities dictate that she has to remarry quickly, or not at all.

When Mordechai returns, he may well become dissatisfied. But it is unclear that his dissatisfaction with Hannah's remarrying is epistemically legitimate although it might be psychologically understandable. Given the specification of the case, Hannah's action appears to be, at least epistemically, reasonable. (Gerken 2011, p. 535)

(TIMETABLE)

Suppose, then, that S leaves the office at 12.00pm in order to meet her partner for lunch at 1pm. S believes truly that there is an express train at 12.20pm which would allow her to arrive in time to make lunch. Further, this belief is justified: S checked the train timetable on the internet just before leaving the office. In fact, unbeknownst to S, she is in a Gettier situation: a hacker has got into the train website and for a joke has replaced all of the current timetables with the last season's timetables. Luckily for S, according to both the old and new timetables, there is an express at 12.00pm. So, S's belief is a case of true justified belief but not knowledge. Let's now consider whether it's appropriate for S to rely on her belief that there is an express at 12.20pm in deciding what to do. It seems that it is appropriate. After all, S checked the timetable and she had no reason to suppose that a hacker had replaced the current timetable with last season's. In such circumstances, it seems appropriate for her to rely on the belief that there is an express at 12.20pm in deciding what to do. (Brown 2008, p. 172)

What these (and similar) cases supposedly demonstrate is that knowledge is not necessary for rational action. Hence, the RKP is claimed to be false.

However, the proponents of the RKP have an answer to this kind of objection, which they anticipated. Central to this answer is the appeal to the possibility of being *excused* for violating a norm.⁷ The idea is that in certain situations we tend to not criticize someone who has acted on less than knowledge because one is excusable for having transgressed the norm. Crucially, it follows then that even in such situations the norm remains in place. Moreover, the need for an action to be excused in such cases shows that there was an instance of a violation of the norm.⁸ Hence, norms can be (and in fact often are) violated. But that, however, should not be taken to bear against the norm in question. We should rather distinguish, following a popular distinction concerning assertions, between an action being primarily and secondarily appropriate.⁹ An action is primarily appropriate when it complies with a norm. An action is secondarily appropriate when a person reasonably believes that it complies with the norm. In cases like (TIMETABLE) and (MARRIAGE 2), the subject's action is secondarily appropriate, but is not primarily appropriate. Hence, these are cases in which subjects violate the norm of action. But they are excusable, since their actions are secondar-

⁷ See, for example, Objection 5 and the reply to it in Hawthorne and Stanley (2008, p. 586).

⁸ *Ibid.* See also Williamson (2005, p. 227).

⁹ See DeRose (2002), who, when arguing in favor of the knowledge norm of assertion, makes an important distinction between an assertion being primarily appropriate when it effectively complies with the norm and an assertion being secondarily appropriate when the speaker reasonably believes to have made an appropriate assertion. See also Williamson (2000, ch. 5 on Assertion). Cf. Gerken (2011).

ily appropriate. This then explains why we tend to think that subjects in cases like (TIMETABLE) and (MARRIAGE 2) should not be criticized. Such an explanation seems to allow us to maintain the RKP against potential refutations.

Many opponents of the RKP have nevertheless found that the appeal to excuses cannot save the RKP. There seem to be at least two problems with the appeal to excuses as an explanation of why subjects in cases like (TIMETABLE) and (MARRIAGE 2) are not subject to criticism (i.e. criticism from the epistemic point of view). First, there is what we may call a *qualitative problem* of explanation by excuses – the RKP proponents do not have a satisfactory account of what exactly is an *excuse* in the relevant cases. And second, there is a *quantitative problem* with explanation by appeal to excuses – the high number of cases where proponents of the RKP will need to appeal to excuses as an explanation of blamelessness for acting on less than knowledge makes the appeal to excuses a rather implausible or even *ad hoc* explanation. Let us consider both problems in more detail.

The qualitative problem is the problem of explaining what exactly must be excused in the various cases. The appeal to excuses presupposes that there is a norm that has been transgressed, where this transgression does not receive a negative appraisal. The important element concerning the norm of action is that the action which is excused is still in some sense not really “good” or correct because it is still a transgression of a norm; in other words, it does not comply with the norm. In this sense then, an excused action is not as “good” as an action that complies perfectly with the norm. This point, however, seems to some to be very implausible when we consider cases such as (TIMETABLE) and (MARRIAGE 2). Many authors have observed that in such cases there is nothing to be excused.¹⁰ S’s decision to go to the train station is just as good as our ordinary decisions in normal (unGettiered) situations. There does not seem to be a difference here. Similarly, Hannah’s choice to remarry in the (MARRIAGE 2) case seems to be as rational as Hannah’s choice in a counterfactual case, where Hannah* makes the choice to remarry, but her husband Mordachai is indeed dead. So they do not appear at all to be transgressions in need of an excuse.

Moreover, it has been observed that appealing to excuses in cases such as (TIMETABLE) and (MARRIAGE 2) cannot solve a further problem concerning irrational but excusable actions. As it stands, the appeal to excuses cannot reasonably distinguish between cases like (TIMETABLE) and (MARRIAGE 2), on the one hand, and on the other hand cases in which a subject

¹⁰ See, for example, Brown (2008), Neta (2009), Smithies (2012), Littlejohn (2009), Gerken (2011).

is under the effect of drugs, has a stroke, is deluded or is mentally ill and hence acts irrationally but is excusable for acting this way.¹¹ According to the RKP, in both instances the actions are excused and hence have the same status *vis-à-vis* their rationality. However, quite clearly, there seems to be a difference between both types of situations. A mentally ill person who has an obsessive thought that aliens are preparing to come and take him away might act irrationally on this belief, for instance, by bricking up his windows. His action, based on a belief that aliens might come, a belief that is clearly not a piece of knowledge, is not a rational one, but it is still an excusable one, since the person is mentally ill. According to opponents of the RKP, situations like (TIMETABLE) and (MARRIAGE 2) seem to be situations of an absolutely different kind – it does not even seem that the actions in the (TIMETABLE) and (MARRIAGE 2) cases are (epistemically) irrational in any sense. The appeal to excuses by the RKP's proponents cannot account for this difference; hence, according to many, the RKP is wrong.¹²

The second problem, the quantitative problem, points to the apparently *ad hoc* nature of the excuse maneuver. More precisely, if the RKP's proponents use excuses to explain why in some cases actions that do not comply with the knowledge norm nevertheless may not be criticized, then they will need to use this explanation in a large number of cases, since cases in which someone acts on less than knowledge are abundant. But then, they will offer an odd picture of our behavior. According to such a picture, we are generally excused but not correct in our actions. But this seems to be *ad hoc*. In short, this kind of view seems to be more like an *ad hoc* rather than a plausible explanation of the real situation. As Gerken has noted:

So, it appears that there will be an abundance of cases in which someone may be excused from violating the knowledge norm. This suggest that the knowledge account will result in a proliferation of excuses. Indeed, it stands in danger of multiplying excuses beyond plausibility. (Gerken 2011, p. 544)

¹¹ See Smithies (2012) and Gerken (2011) for this kind of example and the argument against the knowledge norm based on these kinds of irrational but excusable acts.

¹² See Gerken (2011) for a more sophisticated argument against the excuse maneuver. He has argued that either the proponents of the RKP state the excuse in epistemic terms or in non-epistemic but rather deontological terms. If the excuse is stated in deontological terms, then, according to Gerken, it imposes an implausibly strong deontological constraint on rational action. But if an excuse is explained in epistemic terms, then either it places a too-strong, higher order requirement on it which would exclude a full range of ordinary cases, or it collapses into a justification norm of action. His conclusion is that the RKP cannot propose a satisfactory account of what is an excuse in the cases where it appeals to the use of an excuse.

In light of these problems, many have adopted more traditional principles about knowledge and action, principles according to which it is justification and not knowledge that makes an action (based on deliberation) rational. The basic idea is that one's acting on p (practical deliberation on p) is rational if and only if the subject is justified in believing that p . Some variations of the justification norm exist now in the literature. Some require that the subject be justified in believing that she is in a position to know that p . Others stick to the traditional picture, in which justified belief that p is necessary and sufficient for rationally acting on p .¹³

4. Knowledge and Levels of Normativity in Practical Deliberation

Should we then conclude that knowledge and rational action are not essentially connected? The main objective of this paper is to argue that no, we should not. I claim that there is a way to maintain a principle linking rational action to knowledge that can avoid the objections discussed above. In the remainder of this article I will show how this principle can be defended. In doing so, I propose to clarify the normative property that the knowledge norm of action captures, and also to complement the RKP with an additional principle concerning (epistemically) rational action.

My proposal is that (a version of) the RKP norm can be maintained if we allow for more nuanced normative categories concerning action from the epistemic point of view. As noted earlier, Hawthorne and Stanley suppose that rational action (from the epistemic point of view) is appropriate action. But appropriate action is just permissible action, according to them. From this it follows that an inappropriate action is a prohibited (from the epistemic point of view) action. In short, according to Hawthorne and Stanley's (and their critics') view there are only two categories of normative properties – from the epistemic point of view actions can be either permissible (when they comply with the RKP) or prohibited (when they do not comply with the RKP). According to Hawthorne and Stanley's approach, these two categories are reflected in our ordinary evaluations of actions expressing blamelessness and blameworthiness accordingly. I, however, believe that this categorization is too coarse-grained, as it fails to capture the full picture of our evaluations of actions. I claim that our evaluations of actions from the epistemic point of view are more complex than those captured by the normative properties “permissible” and “prohibited”. In what follows I will

¹³ Among those who endorse a kind of justified belief norm of (rational) action are for example Gerken (2011), Smith (2012). Among those who defend a more sophisticated norm, a norm of justified belief that one knows that p , are for example Smithies (2012), Neta (2009).

try to propose a better categorization. More specifically, my aim is to outline a more nuanced categorization of the normativity of action from the epistemic point of view. The advantage of my classification is that it respects all of Hawthorne and Stanley's intuitions, and at the same time it provides a way to avoid the objections that have been raised against their view.

Here, then, is my classification of the (epistemically) normative statuses of actions with respect to their evaluation:

- (AAA) extra praise deserving actions;
- (AA) meritorious actions;
- (A) blameless actions;
- (B) blameworthy but excused actions;
- (C) blameworthy and non-excusable actions.

We can see the well-foundedness of this classification system when we consider our ordinary evaluations of actions.

The (AAA) category is the category that captures the (epistemically) normative property of actions that receive our most positive evaluations. Actions that receive the most positive evaluations from the epistemic point of view are actions that accomplish something supererogatory, something for which they deserve an extraordinary, supplementary praise. Examples of such actions include the following cases:

(TIMETABLE 2)

Suppose that everything is like in the (TIMETABLE) case, except that S, before deciding to leave her office does a quick supplementary research on the Internet and discovers that the timetable that she just consulted is the same as that of the previous year. She now has discovered that there might be a problem with the accuracy of the timetable and therefore she does not base her action on it. Instead she calls the info-line and gets firsthand information that the train leaves at the same time as last year, that is at 12.20pm. She now bases her acting on knowledge of the proposition that the train is leaving at 12.20pm.

(MATRIX)

Some inhabitants of the Matrix world manage to discover the truth about their deception. Given the extremely well-designed computer system that rules the Matrix world, it was an almost impossible task. Now they, the resurgence team, act on their knowledge and try to free the others.

(TRUMAN SHOW)

Truman in the Truman Show manages, based on careful observation, to discover that he lives in a television studio and that his life is a giant construction. Now, he is trying to reach the horizon in order to escape, based on his knowledge that the skies he sees are just another artificial construction.

The second normative category of actions with respect to the epistemic point of view is the category in which actions receive the evaluation of meritoriousness, the (AA) category in my classification.

The term “meritoriousness” might appear a bit old-fashioned, but I believe it captures better than any other a very important category that we also use when we evaluate actions from the epistemic point of view, a category that seems to be neglected in contemporary discussions about the norms of rationality of action. Before turning to this evaluative category of action in more detail, I would like to make some comments on how I understand meritoriousness in general.

“Meritorious”, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, has various senses. It means, among other things: (1) “Of an action: entitling a person to reward”; and also (2) “Deserving reward or gratitude. Now also more generally: well-deserving; meriting commendation; having merit. In recent use the term is sometimes understood as conferring limited praise, being applied to works regarded as painstaking and comprehensive, rather than original or stylish”; and (3) “*Law* (chiefly *N. Amer.*). Of an action, a claim, etc: having merits, likely to succeed on the merits of the case”.¹⁴ In short, the evaluative category of meritoriousness seems to capture those positive evaluations (i.e. praise) which are not the highest positive evaluations possible (since it confers only “limited praise”); at the same time, it is a category that recognizes the desert (appropriateness) of reward and also captures the idea (especially in the legal context) that some actions or agents deserve the reward (for example, success, praise or admiration) because of their inherent, intrinsic qualities, and not due to some external or environmental context or luck (see sense 3 and also one of the senses of “the merit”).¹⁵ It is important to note that meritorious actions and agents are not merely blameless actions or agents. Meritorious actions have something more, some positive value that exceeds mere blamelessness. Although, as already noted, “meritoriousness” is not the highest possible positive evaluation, the highest one being captured by evaluations of the supererogatory aspects of some actions. Hence, meritorious actions are actions that are not supererogatory

¹⁴ See <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/116809?redirectedFrom=meritorious#eid>.

¹⁵ From the Oxford English Dictionary: “*the merits* (rarely, †*the merit*) (of a case, question, etc.): (*Law*) the intrinsic rights and wrongs of a case, in contradistinction to extraneous or technical points, esp. of procedure; (*gen.*) the intrinsic rights and wrongs or excellences and defects of something. *on its* (also *their*, etc.) *merits* : without regard to anything but its (their, etc.) intrinsic excellences or defects. *to have the merits* (*Law*): (of a party to a suit, a suit, a claim, etc.) to be in the right as to the question in dispute (said esp. when for technical reasons a favourable decision cannot be given)” (<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/116794?rskey=EmYSZE&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>).

and not prohibited, but at the same time are accomplished with excellence (they are admirable), in a way that is (and could only be) successful. For example, a child under her parents' authority has the obligation to study at school (that is, the prohibition to fail in school). But one can comply with this obligation in various ways. One can comply with this obligation in a rather mediocre way. In this case, the child is blameless, since she managed to comply with the norm. However, she is merely blameless. In particular, she is in no way admirable in her compliance with the obligation of learning at school. On the contrary, if a child pursues her studies with excellence, that is, in such a way that as a result she could not fail (in any of the closest possible worlds) the examination and she gains some inherent skills – what we can call “merits” – she is not merely blameless, she is admirable. In this latter case, she is still blameless, but she has also something more – she learned in a meritorious way.

Furthermore, in philosophical discourse the term “merit” is not peripheral, though it is not central to contemporary discussions.¹⁶

Now, turning back to the evaluation of actions from the epistemic point of view, I believe that we need to state explicitly the normative category that can capture evaluations attributing (epistemic) meritoriousness to actions. These evaluations are captured, I believe, by the normative property under the (AA) category. The difference between the (AAA) category and the (AA) category is that, while in the (AAA) category the extra-praiseworthy actions are of the supererogatory kind, that is, they deserve extra praise because of some heroic or at least extraordinary non-obligatory achievement, the actions from the (AA) kind are admirable (limited praise worthy) actions that are not supererogatory. The difference with respect to the actions of type (A) is that (AA) actions are permitted actions that deserve admiration, whereas (A) actions are permitted actions that are not admirable. In short, the actions of the (AA) kind are those in which we tend to judge, “Well done!” when we consider them from the epistemic point of view. On the other hand, the expression, “It’s OK”, will better suit merely blameless actions (the (A) category), and expressions with superlatives will be best applied to actions of the (AAA) kind. The following example illustrates well the (AA) kind of actions:

¹⁶ Merit was of course an important element in Scholastic philosophy and also played a crucial role in Kantian ethics. It has been associated with a person’s admirable qualities, as defined by Blackburn: “A person’s merits are his or her admirable qualities” (Blackburn 2008, *s.v.* “merit”). However, the foundational issues concerning merit, such as the issue of the grounds of distinction between moral and non-moral merit, seem to be rather complicated. Unfortunately we will not be able to undertake here a further, metatheoretical examination of “merit” and “meritorious”.

(STAYING AT HOME)

Peter's friends are having great time in a chalet in the nearby mountains. Peter has finished his work late on a Friday night and plans to take his car to join his friends in the chalet for the weekend. The chalet is not far away, the trip is not expensive, and Peter has no obligations or important things to do in town over the weekend. Furthermore, these are very old friends, friends that Peter hasn't seen in years. However, as he gets ready to leave, he realizes that his car has no winter tires, nor chains for the tires. The road, however, is rather icy. Besides that, Peter is rather tired. But he has no clear idea about the degree of danger of driving in these conditions. Therefore, he does a quick search on Google about driving on ice without winter tires or chains and finds some websites where experts give their opinion on the subject. In short, he learns that going up into the mountains now without winter tires and in his current fatigued condition could easily lead to an accident. So he decides not to go. More specifically, he treats the propositions that he is tired and his car is not well equipped to guarantee his safety on the way to the chalet as a reason for staying at home and not going to the chalet.

It seems that in this example, our natural reaction to Peter's practical deliberation is not just, "It's OK to stay home", but rather, "Well done!". In other words, we are inclined to give (limited) praise, or admiration, to Peter's action rather than to pronounce a mere judgment of blamelessness. On the other hand, Peter's action is not extra praiseworthy either. He did not do something that surpassed his obligations. Apparently, he did not do something supererogatory. He merely did what he should have done – more precisely, he did not do what was prohibited. But still, he did it in a meritorious way. He could not have failed to treat the right reason for action as *his* reason for action in this scenario. He did not merely accidentally treat the right reason for action as his reason for action. For example, he did not stay at home just because he had a vague idea that it could be dangerous to drive in certain conditions.

The third category, category (A), concerns the actions that are judged to be blameless from the epistemic point of view. Importantly, these actions are not blameless because they are excused. There is nothing to be excused, since they comply with the relevant obligation – they are not transgressing what is prohibited. However, they are not admirable actions either. The success of these actions is not due to the agent's own skills or to their intrinsic excellence, but it is either accidental or depends in an important way on lucky circumstances (environmental luck). In my previous example concerning meritorious and non-meritorious action in general, the child who merely passes her examination is clearly blameless, but her success might be due to the luck of getting the only question that she knew the answer to, or to some random and vague recollection of the subject matter, which is clearly a case of luck. Similarly, in the domain of practical deliberation typical examples of this kind are provided by cases such as (MARRIAGE 2) and (TIMETABLE).

Agents in such cases are clearly blameless, and there is nothing we need to excuse them for. However, their success in treating the right reason for action as their reason for action is largely due to accidental circumstances and luck, which makes their actions not actually admirable, but only not blameworthy.

The fourth category, (B), concerns actions that seem to be blameworthy, but are nevertheless excused. Paradigmatic examples include the Mentally ill, Drug user and Brainwashing cases from Smithies (2012) and Gerken (2011). Someone who bricks his windows up because he believes that aliens are preparing to kidnap him is blameworthy in his practical deliberation. But if such a person is mentally ill, or under the effects of some drug, he is excused for this point of practical deliberation. Clearly, then, this category differs from (A) as well as from (C).

Category (C) contains the worst evaluations – the most negative, that is, actions that are blameworthy and are also non-excusable. We can include in this category actions based on wishful thinking or other cognitive vices. For example, if Peter from my (STAYING AT HOME) example above, after finding the information about the dangers of driving on icy roads without winter tires, nevertheless took his car and drove to the chalet on the basis of a mere conviction that nothing bad could happen to him, we would naturally judge his practical deliberation as blameworthy and not excusable. In this case he acted, it seems, merely on wishful thinking.

Before we return to the issue of the RKP, it is important to notice that not only is there a gradual ordering in the present categorization of normativity in practical deliberation, but some categories appear to encompass others. The following chart illustrates the normative picture that I have just described concerning the normativity of actions from the epistemic point of view:

| | (extra) praiseworthy | meritorious | blameless | excused | |
|-----|----------------------|-------------|-----------|---------|--------------------------------|
| AAA | YES | YES | - | - | Ex. (MATRIX) |
| AA | NO | YES | - | - | Ex. (STAYING AT HOME) |
| A | NO | NO | YES | - | Ex. (TIMETABLE), (MARRIAGE 2) |
| B | NO | NO | NO | YES | Ex. (MARRIAGE), Mentally ill |
| C | NO | NO | NO | NO | Ex. Acting on wishful thinking |

Table 1

Now, my thesis is that we should restrict the RKP, that is, the knowledge norm of action, to the normative category (AA). In order to maintain this thesis I propose a complementary principle about the appropriateness of actions in which I link appropriateness with meritoriousness in the following way:

The Appropriate-Meritorious Action Principle (AMAP): It is appropriate to treat a proposition p as a reason for action if and only if it is meritorious to treat the proposition p as a reason for action.

In evaluating the AMAP we must answer two questions. The first question is why it is appropriate to treat a proposition as a reason for action when it is meritorious to treat that proposition as a reason for action. The second is why it is appropriate to treat a proposition as a reason for action only when it is meritorious to treat that proposition as a reason for action. The first question is easy to answer. If an action is meritorious from the epistemic point of view, as defined in the discussion about category (AA), then it cannot be the case that it is not appropriate. Actions that are admirable are also appropriate. It would be very odd to say things like, "This action is admirable, but it is clearly not appropriate". Hence, I take it for granted that an admirable quality implies appropriateness. Therefore, a meritorious action, that is, an admirable action (in the sense of an action deserving limited praise), is also an appropriate one. What is more, since meritorious actions have the intrinsic quality of excellence, practical deliberations of the (AA) kind will not fail in any nearby possible world – that is, subjects performing meritorious practical deliberation adopt the right reason for action not only in the actual world, but also in all nearby possible worlds. Hence, it seems that if an action is meritorious it is also always appropriate.

A more complex issue is raised by the second question. Why should we think that an action is epistemically appropriate only when it is meritorious? Here, in responding to this question, my strategy is to appeal to the non-accidental character of appropriate actions. I assume that appropriate actions cannot be appropriate accidentally. In general, it seems quite odd to accept that something or someone satisfies the appropriateness condition and yet the item or the subject in question is appropriate only by accident. Imagine that X is your favorite candidate for the presidency of your country. It would be odd for you to answer the question of whether you think that X is an appropriate candidate for the job by saying, "Well, yes, she is an appropriate candidate, but I know that anyone else could be as good as her if they were in the same situation as her". In short, it seems that we would not judge someone as an appropriate candidate for that or another job, if we were not sure about their previous personal achievements, especially if we knew that their previous achievements were due only to fortunate circumstances. The non-accidental character of appropriateness seems to be confirmed also by our

everyday use of “appropriate”. A quick (that is, neither exhaustive nor conclusive) search on Google shows that among approximately 606,000,000 occurrences of the word “appropriate” only 4,710 match with “accidentally appropriate”, among which the majority seems to be either a play on words or loose talk (inexact usage).¹⁷ Hence, we have a *prima facie* reason to think that what is appropriate cannot be such merely by accident. The same, I believe, also applies to practical deliberation: an appropriate practical deliberation cannot be appropriate by accident. To say that someone treats a proposition as a reason for action appropriately but accidentally seems to me to be, at best, imprecise usage.

Now, the important point is that among the levels of evaluation of actions that have been identified, only meritoriousness and extra-praiseworthiness can confer a non-accidental character on an action. Hence, as appropriateness excludes accident, it seems that only these two could be receivable candidates for identifying appropriate actions. Appropriate actions are not merely blameless actions, since blamelessness is compatible with accident. As in the case of the student passing an examination merely by the luck of getting a question which corresponds with the only answer she knows, it seems that any action that is merely blameless can be successful only by accident. So it is not the case that an action can be appropriate merely by being blameless. On the other hand, appropriate actions cannot be limited to those deserving extra praise. Certainly, extra praiseworthy actions are appropriate. But it seems that extra praiseworthy actions are appropriate by virtue of being meritorious. To claim the contrary would be to demand too much. Therefore, it seems that appropriateness can be captured only by meritoriousness.

The last step in my defense of an adjusted version of the RKP consists in claiming that only knowledge can satisfy the meritoriousness constraint on practical deliberation. Only knowledge, and not justified true belief (or justified false belief), has the intrinsic characteristic of being non-accidental. One cannot know something merely by accident. However, one can have justified true belief merely by accident, as Gettier cases have famously taught us. But, as we have already seen, a meritorious practical deliberation cannot be such merely by accident. Hence, one treats a proposition as a reason for acting in a meritorious way only when one knows it.

But if only knowledge satisfies meritoriousness and only meritorious actions are appropriate, then we have come full-circle back to the RPK norm: when a subject’s choice is *p*-dependent, it is appropriate to treat the proposition that *p* as a reason for action if and only if the subject knows that *p*.

¹⁷ Similar habits of usage seems also to apply to the word “suitable”, which I take to be not a perfect, but still a synonym of “appropriate”.

The RKP supplemented with the AMAP seems to do justice to all the intuitive reactions to the original cases that Hawthorne and Stanley advanced in favor of the RKP. Each of the criticisms that Hawthorne and Stanley observed in their cases can be stated as a criticism about the non-meritorious character of the actions involved. Some cases involve additional blameworthiness. I suspect that some cases, such as (DOG AND NEEDLE), seem to receive extra blame because they involve actions that have consequences which are potentially morally wrong. It is not clear that we can distinguish neatly between judgments attributing blame merely on epistemic-theoretical grounds and judgments attributing blame on moral grounds. Hence, it might be that our intuitions (of blameworthiness) in the original cases are largely due to our judgments about the moral consequences of the case. However, even if the subjects in the original cases were blameworthy also from the epistemic point of view, this would not contradict my interpretation of the RKP. This is because blameworthiness implies the absence of meritoriousness (see the table of normative levels in practical deliberation). Therefore, any action that is judged blameworthy from the epistemic point of view also lacks any merit from the epistemic point of view.

My approach also preempts some objections that have been raised to the RKP. Notably, the (TIMETABLE) and (MARRIAGE 2) cases no longer constitute a problem. Armed with our classification of the levels of normativity in practical deliberation, we can agree with Brown and Gerken that the subjects in the (TIMETABLE) and (MARRIAGE 2) cases are not blameworthy (though still not excused), but at the same time we can maintain that their practical deliberations are not appropriate. Most importantly, in taking this line of defense we need not appeal to excuses. Subjects in the (TIMETABLE) and (MARRIAGE 2) cases do not treat the relevant propositions as reasons for acting appropriately because they do not treat them as reasons for acting in a meritorious way. Only knowledge can be a foundation for meritorious practical deliberation and hence also for appropriate practical deliberation.

My classification also enables us to see why cases like those of the Mentally ill, the Brainwashed, and the Drug user are not a problem for the RKP. The practical deliberation in the Mentally ill case is an excused blameworthy action, whereas in (TIMETABLE) and (MARRIAGE 2) it is a blameless practical deliberation. In short, Mentally ill and (TIMETABLE) correspond to different normative categories. This is compatible with the RKP.

Thus, I conclude that the RKP manages to capture the correct link between rational action and knowledge. In defining rational action as appropriate deliberation, and appropriate deliberation as meritorious deliberation, we can see that only knowledge is necessary for rational action. Knowledge, and only knowledge, can make it rational to treat a proposition as a reason for action.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I argued for a version of the knowledge account of rational action. I first considered a previous proposal, the Reason-Knowledge Principle, stated by Hawthorne and Stanley. I examined its motivation and considered various objections against it. In light of these objections I proposed a supplementary principle linking appropriate action to meritorious action. I concluded that, given my supplementary principle and a detailed account of the levels of normativity in practical deliberation, the Reason-Knowledge Principle can be maintained.*

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* The research for this paper was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) grant number 100015_131794 (project "Knowledge, Evidence, and Practice"). I would like to thank Davide Fassio, Kathryn Sawyer, an anonymous referee, and the editors of this volume for their very valuable comments and discussions. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2012 European Epistemology Network Meeting in Bologna-Modena, 28-30 June 2012.

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