

Knowledge Norms and Assessing Them Well

Dustin Locke
Claremont McKenna College

Penultimate Draft. To be published in *Thought*. Please cite published version.

Abstract

Jonathan Ichikawa (2012) argues that the standard counterexamples to the knowledge norm of practical reasoning are no such thing. More precisely, he argues that those alleged counterexamples rest on claims about *which actions are appropriate* rather than on claims about *which propositions can be appropriately treated as reasons for action*. Since the knowledge norm of practical reasoning concerns the latter and not the former, Ichikawa contends that proponents of the alleged counterexamples must offer a theory that bridges the gap between the two types of claims. I argue, first, that the standard counterexamples do not rest on claims about which actions are appropriate, second, that even if they did, we would not need a *theory* to bridge the gap between the two types of claims, and, third, that even if we did need such a theory, a plausible theory is on offer.

Introduction

Here's an interesting thesis that has an important message:

[C]laims about who knows what, and about what actions are appropriate, are in general insufficient to provide test cases of the knowledge norm of practical reasoning.
(Jonathan Ichikawa, 'Knowledge Norms and Acting Well', 2012: 50)

To see what Ichikawa has in mind, suppose that the following are both true.

- (1) I know that the dining hall is serving my favorite dish.
- (2) It is not appropriate for me to go to the dining hall.

According to the knowledge norm of practical reasoning, S may appropriately treat p as a reason for action if and only if S knows that p .¹ Is this principle consistent with the conjunction of (1) and (2)? It is. The knowledge norm implies that, given (1), it is appropriate for me to treat the proposition that the dining hall is serving my favorite dish as a reason for acting *in one way or another*. It does not follow from this, however, that it is appropriate for me to treat that proposition as a reason *for going to the dining hall*. But even if this did follow, it certainly wouldn't follow that it is appropriate for me to *go to the dining hall*—after all, I might have even stronger reasons to *not* go to the dining hall.

Generalizing, there is a three-way distinction that Ichikawa is urging us to keep in mind:

- (R) Judgments about which propositions can be appropriately treated as reasons for action.
- (RA) Judgments about which propositions can be appropriately treated as reasons for which actions.
- (A) Judgments about which actions are appropriate.

According to Ichikawa, the standard objections to the knowledge norm of practical reasoning rest on claims of type (A), rather than on claims of type (R).² Such objections are successful only if we can bridge the gap between (A) and (R), and to do that, Ichikawa contends, we need a 'theory of rationalizing reasons'—that is, a theory of when a reason is sufficient to make rational a particular course of action. Ichikawa claims that without such a theory, the alleged counterexamples to the knowledge norm of practical reasoning are no such thing.

I disagree. While I grant the distinction between (R) and (A), the standard counterexamples withstand Ichikawa's objection. I here suggest three independent reasons why. First, the standard counterexamples to the knowledge norm of practical reasoning do not essentially proceed indirectly via claims about which actions are appropriate, and so proponents of those counterexamples do not need to bridge the gap between (R) and (A). Second, even if proponents of the standard counterexamples do need to bridge the gap between (R) and (A), they do not need a *theory* of rationalizing reasons to do so. And finally, third, even if they did

¹ Proponents of the knowledge norm of practical reasoning include most notably John Hawthorne (2004), Jason Stanley (2005), and Hawthorne and Stanley (2008). Proponents specifically of the right-to-left direction of the knowledge norm, which is the direction under consideration in this paper, include Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath (2007).

² Ichikawa specifically mentions Jessica Brown (2008), Baron Reed (2010), and Jennifer Lackey (2010).

need a theory of rationalizing reasons to bridge the gap between (R) and (A), there is a plausible theory on offer. I establish these points in turn.

I. Must the objection be indirect?

While several alleged counterexamples to the knowledge norm of practical reasoning are now standardly discussed in the literature, I will follow Ichikawa in focusing on one of Jessica Brown's (2008) cases.

SURGEON

A student is spending the day shadowing a surgeon. In the morning he observes her in clinic examining patient A who has a diseased left kidney. The decision is taken to remove it that afternoon. Later, the student observes the surgeon in theatre where patient A is lying anaesthetized on the operating table. The operation hasn't started as the surgeon is consulting the patient's notes. The student is puzzled and asks one of the nurses what's going on:

Student: I don't understand. Why is she looking at the patient's records? She was in clinic with the patient this morning. Doesn't she even know which kidney it is?

Nurse: Of course, she knows which kidney it is. But, imagine what it would be like if she removed the wrong kidney. She shouldn't operate before checking the patient's records.
(Brown 2008: 1144 – 1145)

How exactly is this case meant to be a counterexample to the knowledge norm? Ichikawa reconstructs the argument as follows.

We have... a pair of intuitive verdicts: one attributing knowledge, and another denying appropriateness of action:

- The surgeon knows (before reading the chart) that the disease is in the left kidney.
- It would be inappropriate for the surgeon to remove the left kidney without first collecting more evidence.

Brown considers this to be a counterexample to the knowledge norm of practical reasoning, but... this cannot be enough... Brown's argument is valid only on the

assumption that *that the disease is in the left kidney* would be a sufficient reason for operating without checking the charts. (Ichikawa 2012: 50 – 51)

On Ichikawa's reconstruction, Brown's argument takes an indirect route: the argument rests on the assumption that it would be inappropriate to undertake a certain course of *action* and concludes from this that it would be inappropriate to treat a certain proposition as a reason for action. In other words, Ichikawa interprets the argument as follows.

The Indirection Objection to the Knowledge Norm

- (1) The surgeon knows (before reading the chart) that the disease is in the left kidney.
- (2) Thus, if the knowledge norm is true, it is appropriate for the surgeon to treat the proposition that the disease is in the left kidney as a reason for action. (from 1)
- (3) But it is not appropriate for the surgeon to remove the left kidney without first collecting more evidence.
- (4) Thus, it is not appropriate for the surgeon to treat the proposition that the disease is in the left kidney as a reason for action. (from 3)
- (5) Thus, the knowledge norm is false. (from 2 and 4)

The fault that Ichikawa finds in the argument concerns the inference from (3) to (4).

Unfortunately, Ichikawa's reconstruction ignores what Brown actually says about cases like SURGEON.

Intuitively these cases put pressure on [the right-to-left direction of the knowledge norm of practical reasoning]: in each one, a subject claims that either she, or a third party, knows something but that it would be inappropriate for her to act on that knowledge. Although the relevant evaluations explicitly concern action, it seems that they reflect claims about the underlying reasoning. For instance, *the relevant intuition in SURGEON is that the surgeon should not rely on the premise that it is the left kidney which is affected in practical reasoning.* (2008: 1145 – 1146, emphasis added)

Brown does not, as Ichikawa suggests, rest the argument on the claim that it would be inappropriate for the surgeon to remove the left kidney without first collecting more evidence.³

³ Although the nurse in Brown's story certainly makes this claim.

Rather, Brown explicitly states that the ‘relevant intuition’ in SURGEON is that the surgeon should not rely in her practical reasoning on the premise that the left kidney is diseased.

Complicating matters a bit here is the fact that Brown is explicitly considering John Hawthorne’s formulation of the knowledge norm of practical reasoning, according to which S may appropriately *rely on p as a premise in her practical reasoning* if and only if S knows that *p*. Ichikawa’s formulation, which I have adopted here, says that S may *appropriately treat p as a reason for action* if and only if S knows that *p*. As Ram Neta (2009: 685) makes clear, Hawthorne’s formulation of the knowledge norm of practical reasoning is not quite equivalent to the formulation under discussion here. Nevertheless, it is clear that Brown’s strategy is to rest her argument *directly* on an instance of the negation of the left-hand-side of the principle she aims to refute—having Hawthorne’s formulation of the principle in mind, Brown rests her argument directly on the claim that it is not appropriate for the surgeon to premise that the left kidney is diseased in her practical reasoning. She does not, as Ichikawa suggests, take what would be the *indirect* route of resting her argument on a claim about which *action* is appropriate. Were Brown explicitly concerned with Ichikawa’s formulation of the knowledge norm, it is thus fairly clear that she would rest her argument directly on the claim that it is not appropriate for the surgeon to treat the proposition that the left kidney is diseased as a reason for action.

That said, there is room for interpretation. While Brown does not explicitly offer the indirect objection, one might think that there are good reasons for attributing such an argument to her.⁴ However, things get tricky here for proponents of Ichikawa’s objection. According to Ichikawa’s objection, the inference from (3) to (4) is *suspect*. Hence, from Ichikawa’s point of view, the principle of charity demands that all other things being equal, one has reason not to attribute to Brown the indirect objection. Now one might argue that all other things are not equal. One might argue that there is some reason that the argument would be even *more* dubious were it to proceed in the direct fashion suggested by a literal reading of the passage from Brown.

Perhaps such an argument would begin with the claim that intuitions about what it is appropriate to treat as a reason for action are somehow less reliable than intuitions about what is an appropriate course of action, and so to get at truths about the former it is better to proceed indirectly via claims about the latter. Ichikawa does not explicitly suggest anything along these lines, but this sort of argument is at least worth considering. However, as far as I can see, there is no reason to be more skeptical about intuitions concerning the appropriateness of treating something as a reason for action than about intuitions concerning the appropriateness of acting

⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

in a certain way. After all, treating a proposition as a reason for action is itself a sort of “mental action”: it is something one does.

Nevertheless, let us simply grant the conclusion of the argument under consideration: the best formulation of Brown’s argument against the knowledge norm is one that proceeds in the *indirect* fashion Ichikawa describes—that is, via certain claims about which actions are appropriate. As we will see, Brown’s argument is compelling nonetheless.

II. Does the indirect objection require a theory of rationalizing reasons?

What exactly is Ichikawa’s complaint about Brown’s argument, now understood as the indirect objection? As Ichikawa puts it, ‘Brown’s argument is valid only on the assumption that *that the disease is in the left kidney* would be a sufficient reason for operating without checking the charts’ (2012: 51). To put this a bit more precisely, Ichikawa’s point is that the inference from (3) to (4) in the Indirect Objection assumes

(3.5) If it is appropriate for the surgeon to treat the proposition that the disease is in the left kidney as a reason for action, then it is appropriate for the surgeon to operate without first collecting more evidence.

Let us grant that Brown’s argument does indeed rest on (3.5). Does Ichikawa give us any reason to think that (3.5) is false? No. Rather, he criticizes Brown’s argument on the ground that it does not offer a ‘theory of rationalizing reasons’—that is, a theory of which reasons are sufficient to rationalize which actions—which would, together with the facts of the situation, imply (3.5). Here is Ichikawa.

[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. The thorough way to evaluate the question would be to defend a detailed account of the rationalizing relation—one which specified necessary and sufficient conditions for an arbitrary proposition’s rationalizing of an arbitrary action. This is well beyond my present scope. Insofar as critics like Brown are attempting to provide *arguments* against the knowledge norm, it is their burden to demonstrate that the propositions in question rationalize the relevant actions. (2012: 52)

This sort of demand is not generally appropriate. All arguments rest on premises, and we would make little progress indeed if we rejected any argument that did not offer a *theory* (of the relevant kind) in support of each of its premises.

To illustrate this point, consider one of Edmund Gettier's famous counterexamples to the justified-true belief account of knowledge. As Gettier describes the case, Smith has evidence that justifies him in believing that Jones will get the job—namely, that the president of the company assured him (Smith) that Jones would get the job (1963: 122). If you like, you can reconstruct Gettier's argument in such a way that it rests on a claim analogous to (3.5).

(3.5*) If it is appropriate for Smith to treat the proposition that the president of the company assured him that Jones will get the job as a reason for belief, then Smith is justified in believing that Jones will get the job.

If this is indeed the right way to reconstruct Gettier's argument, then one possible way to respond to the argument is to argue *against* (3.5*). But to demand that Gettier offer a *theory* of rationalizing (epistemic) reasons in support of (3.5*) is to demand too much. Gettier could reasonably respond to such a demand as follows: I do not have a theory of which reasons rationalize which beliefs; nonetheless, it is intuitively plausible that in the circumstances I have envisioned, the proposition that the president of the company assured Smith that Jones would get the job is a sufficient reason for Smith to believe that Jones will get the job. A proponent of Brown's argument can reasonably respond to Ichikawa's demand in the same fashion: I do not have a theory of which reasons rationalize which actions; nonetheless, it is intuitively plausible that in the circumstances I have envisioned, the proposition that the left kidney is diseased is a sufficient reason for the surgeon to operate without first collecting more evidence.⁵

This would probably be a good time to also note that Ichikawa's criticism is a double-edged sword. John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley (2008) offer the most developed defense of the knowledge norm to date. Aside from defending the norm against various objections,

⁵ There is a question here about the degree of analogy with Gettier's case. In particular, it is possible that one has a *stronger* intuition with respect to Gettier's case than with respect to Brown's case. Personally, I am unable to detect any such difference in my own intuitions. What about those who can? It is difficult to say very much here without entering into controversial questions about the epistemic significance of intuitions, but perhaps we can say this much: provided that one shares Brown's intuition, and one has no undermining defeaters with respect to this intuition, then Brown's case serves as at least *some* evidence against the knowledge norm. The important thing for present purposes is not the exact degree of evidential support Brown's case provides against the knowledge norm, but whether it is capable of doing so without being accompanied by a theory of rationalizing reasons. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this point.

Hawthorne and Stanley's paper contains no arguments in its favor other than considerations of various cases where the knowledge norm seems to get the right result.⁶ But if we may not rely directly on intuitions about what is appropriately treated as a reason, then these arguments too must proceed indirectly via intuitions about which actions are appropriate. Ichikawa should thus demand that these arguments be accompanied by a theory of rationalizing reasons to bridge the gap between claims about which actions are appropriate and claims about which propositions can be appropriately treated as reasons. Since proponents of such arguments have offered no such theory, Ichikawa's criticism applies here as much as it does to the arguments against the knowledge norm.

While Ichikawa acknowledges that his criticism 'cuts both ways', he does not seem to think that this undermines the case for the knowledge norm, at least not to the extent that he thinks it undermines the case against the knowledge norm. In a footnote, Ichikawa suggests that Hawthorne and Stanley's case for the knowledge norm withstands his objection to the standard case against it. Unfortunately, he does not say why.

But as before, let us simply grant Ichikawa's contentions: let us simply grant his demand for a theory of rationalizing reasons and his suggestion that this requirement, if it cannot be met, uniquely undermines the case *against* the knowledge norm. We can grant all of this because the demand can be met.

III. Is there a plausible theory of rationalizing reasons to support (3.5)?

Let 'p is a sufficient reason for S to do A' mean that *if it is appropriate for S to treat p as a reason for action, then it is appropriate for S to do A*. In this terminology, what Ichikawa demands is that we fill in the following.

A Theory of Rationalizing Reasons. The proposition *p* is a sufficient reason for S to do A if and only if...

Ichikawa mentions one possible 'kernel of such a theory' (2012: footnote 3). According to that theory, *p* is a sufficient reason for S to do A if and only if: were S's belief state updated with *p*, then S's action would be 'rationally intelligible'. As Ichikawa notes, the claim that 'S's action would be

⁶ The trouble with so-called 'theoretical' arguments in support of the knowledge norm of practical reasoning is that they all seem to rest on theoretical assumptions that are at least as controversial as the knowledge norm itself. Consider, for example, the argument from assertion. According to this argument, (1) knowledge is the norm of assertion, and (2) the same norm governs both assertion and practical reasoning. Both (1) and (2) are highly controversial (see Brown 2012).

rationally intelligible' does not 'say that [the action] would be justified—we allow that S's beliefs and desires might be defective in a way undermining of the claim—but it would be conditionally justified' (*ibid*). Let us call this theory of rationalizing reason the 'rational intelligibility proposal'.

It seems to me that the rational intelligibility proposal suggests a theory of rationalizing reasons that supports (3.5) of the indirect objection to the knowledge norm: [the surgeon's belief state updated with the proposition that the left kidney is diseased] does make rationally intelligible proceeding with the operation without first collecting more evidence. Ichikawa disagrees. He claims that if the surgeon does not know that she knows that the left kidney is diseased, then 'her belief that the left kidney is diseased does not make rationally intelligible her failure to check the chart'.

It is possible that Ichikawa and I understand the rational intelligibility proposal in two distinct ways. He apparently takes the question to be whether *the surgeon's belief that the left kidney is diseased* makes rationally intelligible proceeding without checking the chart. However, the theory does not ask us to consider the subject's belief that p —rather, it asks us to consider the subject's belief state updated with p . Applied to Brown's case, the question is whether the surgeon's *belief state updated with the proposition that the left kidney is diseased* makes rationally intelligible proceeding with the operation without checking the chart. What this question amounts to—and whether it is distinct from the question Ichikawa has in mind—will depend on how we understand the phrases 'S's belief state is updated with p ' and 'S's action would be rationally intelligible'.

On their standard decision-theoretic interpretations, the phrase 'S's belief state is updated with p ' means that S's credences have been conditionalized on p and the phrase 'S's action would be rationally intelligible' means that *S's action would, given S's updated credences and values, have expected utility as great as any other action available to her*. Given this interpretation of the rational intelligibility proposal, our question is whether updating the surgeon's credences by conditionalizing on the proposition that the left kidney is diseased leaves *operating without first collecting more evidence* as the (or a) action with highest expected utility. A bit more precisely, our question is whether the details of the case *can be filled in* such that this is so, while leaving in place the verdicts that the surgeon knows that the left kidney is diseased and that it is not appropriate for the surgeon to operate without first collecting more evidence. To see that there is such a way of filling in the details, suppose that all of the following are true.

- (1) The surgeon cares about, and only about, whether the patient lives.⁷

⁷ I make this rather extreme stipulation for the sake of simplicity. One might worry whether making this stipulation means that we are no longer defending *Brown's* case, for a more natural

- (2) The surgeon has credence 1 that exactly one of the patient's kidneys is diseased, and a .99 degree of credence that it is the left kidney.
- (3) If the surgeon performs the surgery without first checking the chart, she will begin it immediately; if she first checks the patient's chart, she will begin the surgery in one minute.
- (4) The surgeon has credence 1 that were she to check the chart, she would then remove the correct kidney.
- (5) If the patient has the correct kidney removed during the operation, then there are the following probabilities that he will live, depending on how soon the surgery begins:
 - (5a) If the surgery begins immediately and the correct kidney is removed, there is a probability of 1 that the patient will live.
 - (5b) If the surgery begins in one minute and the correct kidney is removed, there is a probability of .999 that the patient will live.
- (6) If the patient has the wrong kidney removed during the operation, then the probability that he will live is 0.

Since, as Brown specified, the surgeon has spent the morning with the patient discussing the upcoming surgery, it is quite plausible that the surgeon knows that the left kidney is diseased, despite the fact that she does not have credence 1 that the left kidney is diseased.⁸ Moreover,

way of filling in the details of Brown's case would be such that the surgeon cares at least to some extent about things other than whether the patient lives. We may concede this point without loss to the argument. Ichikawa's contention is not specifically about Brown's case. Ichikawa's contention is about the necessity of coupling alleged counterexamples to the knowledge norm with an appropriate and plausible theory of rationalizing reasons. The purpose of this section is to meet Ichikawa's demand: to provide a counterexample coupled with an appropriate and plausible theory of rationalizing reasons. Relatedly, one might also worry that the stipulations I have introduced in some way undermine the intuition that it is inappropriate for the surgeon to proceed without first checking the chart. We can for the sake of argument concede this point as well. With the stipulations now in place, we need not simply rely on the intuition in question—we can simply run an expected utility calculation to determine which course of action, given standard decision theory, is the most rational. The result is checking the chart before operating. Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to consider these points.

⁸ This contention is somewhat controversial. According to some authors, knowledge that p requires, among other things, credence 1 that p . While we cannot hope to settle this issue here, I will briefly make two points. First, those with roughly fallibilist leanings will see such a view as too high of a price to pay for defending the knowledge norm, and hence, many proponents of the knowledge norm have sought to defend their view while rejecting the thesis that knowledge requires credence 1 (see Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, 2007). Second, given some rather non-controversial auxiliary assumptions, the thesis that knowledge requires credence 1 implies the right-to-left direction of the knowledge norm—the direction that Brown aims to refute.

as before, it is not appropriate for the surgeon to operate without first checking the records: the expected utility of operating immediately is $.99L$, where L is the amount of positive value the surgeon places on the patient living, while the expected utility of first checking the chart is $.999L$. However, if the surgeon *conditionalizes* her credences on the proposition that it is the left kidney that is diseased, then operating immediately has higher expected utility—specifically, operating immediately has an expected utility of L , while the expected utility of first checking the chart still has an expected utility of $.999L$. In other words, updating the surgeon’s belief state by conditionalizing on the proposition that the left kidney is diseased does, contra Ichikawa, make rationally intelligible her operating without first checking the chart. Hence, given the rational intelligibility proposal, the proposition that the left kidney is diseased *is* a sufficient reason for the surgeon to operate without first checking the chart—that is, (3.5) is true.

To be sure, there are other ways of filling in the details of Brown’s case such that, given the above theory of rationalizing reasons, (3.5) comes out false. Suppose, for example, that the surgeon cares not just about whether the patient will live or die, but about whether she *follows the law* and that the law requires surgeons to check their patients’ records just before any operation. In that case, merely conditionalizing on the proposition that the patient’s left kidney is diseased may not make it the case that operating immediately has highest expected utility: if the value of following the law is high enough, first checking the patient’s record will still have higher expected utility than immediately performing the operation. However, the question is not whether the details can be filled in such that the case is *not* a counterexample—the question is whether the details can be filled in such that the case *is* a counterexample. And indeed they can.

As I’ve just argued, even if we grant Ichikawa’s demand that a proponent of Brown’s argument offer a theory of rationalizing reasons that justifies (3.5), there is a plausible theory on offer. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that nothing in Brown’s argument commits its proponents to the particular theory of rationalizing reasons under consideration here. My point has been merely illustrative—it has been to show that there is a plausible theory of rationalizing reasons such that, given that theory and one possible way of filling in the details of Brown’s case, the case stands as a counterexample to the knowledge norm of practical reasoning.

Hence, proponents of objections like Brown’s will see cases like SURGEON as counterexamples not only to the knowledge norm, but to the thesis that knowledge requires credence 1. Nevertheless, it is not insignificant that rejecting this thesis does seem to be a commitment of those who endorse objection’s like Brown’s. Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to make this commitment explicit.

IV. Conclusion

The primary purpose of this paper has been to defend the standard objection to the knowledge norm of practical reasoning against Ichikawa's criticism. Along the way, we have hopefully gained clearer insight into just how the standard objection goes, just how powerful it is, and (thus) just what is wrong with the knowledge norm of practical reasoning.

Acknowledgements

I owe special thanks to Amy Kind, David Plunkett, Eliot Michaelson, Jonathan Ichikawa, and an anonymous referee for this journal for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

Works Cited

Brown, Jessica. 2008. 'Knowledge and Practical Reasoning'. *Philosophy Compass* 3: pp. 1135 – 1152

Brown, Jessica. 2012. 'Assertion and Practical Reasoning: Common or Divergent Standards?' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84: 123 – 157

Dancy, Jonathan. 2000. *Practical Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Fantl, Jeremy and Matthew McGrath. 2007. 'On Pragmatic Encroachment in Epistemology'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65: 558 – 589

Gettier, Edmund. 1963. 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge'. *Analysis* 23: 121 - 123

Hawthorne, John. 2004. *Knowledge and Lotteries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hawthorne, John and Jason Stanley. 2008. 'Knowledge and Action'. *The Journal of Philosophy* 105: 571 – 590

Ichikawa, Jonathan Jenkins. 2012. 'Knowledge Norms and Acting Well'. *Thought* 1: 49 – 55

Lackey, Jennifer. 2010. 'Acting on Knowledge.' *Philosophical Perspectives*, 24: 361 – 82

Neta, Ram. 2009. 'Treating Something as a Reason for Action'. *Nous* 43: 684 – 689

Reed, Baron. 2010. 'A Defense of Stable Invariantism.' *Nous* 44: 224 – 44

Stanley, Jason. 2005. *Knowledge and Practical Interests*. Oxford: Oxford University Press