

Propositional Attitudes

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ROSS AND SCHROEDER ON BELIEF

Like Weatherson, Ross and Schroeder aim to explain pragmatic encroachment on the basis of an account of belief; but they argue that their account (the ‘reasoning disposition account’) is better placed to do this.

1. The Reasoning Disposition Account

This is explained in terms of the relation: *S treats proposition p as true in reasoning*. This relation is initially characterized as follows.

In the context of practical reasoning, we may say that an agent *treats* a given proposition *p as true* just in case she evaluates her alternatives by the same procedure by which she would evaluate them conditional on *p*. (p. 6)

This seems to amount to one’s reasoning being represented by a decision table that does not incorporate possibilities on which *p* is false.

(Do we get the result that all practically irrelevant propositions are being treated as true by the agent? Probably. But hopefully Weatherson’s ‘impractical propositions’ problem will be solved by something else in the account.)

In any case, the idea is that we have *defeasible* dispositions to treat at least some (not completely certain) propositions as true in this way.

That the dispositions are defeasible is shown by ‘high stakes’ cases (e.g., the nut allergy/sandwich case).

Thus, on the *reasoning disposition account* of belief, beliefs are identified with these dispositions (or, at least, this is *part* of what it is to have a belief).

More precisely, the idea seems to be: believing that *p* involves having a defeasible disposition to treat *p* as true in one’s reasoning *whenever p is relevant*. (Or is even that quite right...?)

And the idea is *then* that in high stakes cases in which *p* is relevant, the disposition is ‘masked’.

The ‘whenever *p* is relevant’ clause is supposed to handle impractical propositions. (The idea is that there will be some possible situation in which *p* is relevant.)

A possible counterexample: what about my disposition to treat as true the proposition that I will do some reasoning today. I seem to have the disposition to treat this proposition as true in my reasoning, whenever it is relevant—but I might not believe it until I actually *do* the reasoning. (General issues about dispositions to form beliefs?)

(Does having an indefeasible disposition to treat a proposition as irrelevant amount to believing it?)

First argument for this account and against Weatherson-style accounts: on the latter you can believe something without treating it as true (R&S claim); all that is required is that you act, or prefer, as if p is true, and this seems very different.

2. The Explanation of Pragmatic Encroachment

The proposed explanation (on the basis of the reasoning disposition account) starts from the principle that if S knows that p then they are justified in occurrently believing that p ; and also the following principle:

Justification Condition on Occurrent Attitudes: If having attitude A essentially involves being disposed to ϕ under circumstance C , then an agent S is justified to occurrently have attitude A in C only if it is rationally permissible for S to ϕ in C . (p. 14)

Using this, they then give the argument on p. 15...

But is not this Justification Condition on Occurrent Attitudes pretty questionable here? After all, the disposition in question is *defeasible*, and so why can we not be justified in having the occurrent attitude as long as we do not actually manifest the disposition? (It may be pointless to have the occurrent attitude but that seems far too weak a consideration to cut ice here.)

Another issue: what about cases of pragmatic encroachment that affect knowledge without affecting justified belief? (E.g., Gettier-ish high stakes cases.) Surely something else is going to be needed here: in which case (as with Weatherson) the account of belief *cannot* obviate the need for an account of knowledge which is sensitive to pragmatic factors.

3. Comparison with ‘Pragmatic Credal Reductivism’

3.1. Correctness

If you believe that p , and p turns out to be false, then you were *wrong* about p .

But how can a view on which believing that p can be constituted merely by having a high degree of belief in p make sense of this thought? (Or so runs R&S’s basic thought...)

How does the reasoning disposition account do better? The idea is:

if p is false then [someone who believes that p] is operating with a conception that corresponds to a non-actual situation with respect to p , and in this manner she is getting things wrong with respect to p . (p. 19–20)

But, insofar as it is rationally permissible to believe that p while at the same time having credence of less than 1 in p , is the account really any better off? After all, such a person can respond to the accusation that they were wrong: hey, I always maintained p might be false!

3.2. *Stability*

This criticism uses the following principle:

Stability. A fully rational agent does not change her beliefs purely in virtue of an evidentially irrelevant change in her credences or preferences. (p. 20)

PCR falls foul of this principle: e.g., in the low stakes sandwich case, according to PCR, a fully rational agent would go from believing to not believing if they increased their credence that their guest had an allergy.

Perhaps the reasoning disposition account can uphold stability. But is it slightly funny for a defender of pragmatic encroachment to wield stability? After all, if we can go from knowing to not knowing purely on the basis of changes in ‘evidentially irrelevant pragmatic factors’, then, if you rationally adjust your credences about such factors, and if your beliefs aim to be knowledge, then is it not rational to go from believing to not believing? (This may seem contentious however!)

But one might also worry that pragmatic encroachment might more directly violate principles in the ballpark of stability. E.g.:

An agent does not go from knowing to not knowing (or vice versa) purely in virtue of evidentially irrelevant changes in their practical situation.

Or perhaps a line could be drawn here?

3.3. *Inconsistency*

PCR has issues with inconsistency.

How do R&S avoid this? They say that having inconsistent beliefs would be ‘cognitively costly’. ?