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The Knowledge-Effect

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The Knowledge-Effect

John Shand

What I wish to discuss is something I term the knowledge-effect. I will argue that awareness of it is important because it is something we need strongly to guard against if we are to make good normative judgements, and apportion well significance and moral weight, so that our overall view of things be not distorted.

In the extreme the knowledge-effect leads to judgmental pareidolia, which is the imposition of meaning and significance on things or events when they do not warrant it either to the degree that we grant or at all. This essay might be viewed as a lesson in normative epistemology or, more plainly, good judgemental housekeeping. Knowledge can corrupt judgement.

Though I shall stick to the expression 'the knowledge-effect', it might also be termed the knowledge-trap. The lead into the knowledge trap, and thus the knowledge-effect, is the false claim that more knowledge must be better than less knowledge for our ability to make good normative judgements generally and moral judgements in particular. Combining 'normative judgements' and 'moral judgements' I mean: how one should think about something, what one should do in respect of it, taking into account priorities, unintended consequences and risk, how greater a moral concern should be given to it, what morally speaking one should do in respect of it. That is to say, all that relates to it not simply the existing facts of a matter. Not all normative judgements are moral judgments, but all moral judgements are normative judgements.

Some may endorse the view that it is simply a matter of the more knowledge the better. But this is a mistake as it takes no account of the effect of knowing in circumscribed cases and knowledge capturing our attention, nor, and most significantly, it takes no account of the distorting effect of the distribution of

knowledge on our normative judgements and moral judgements in respect of their appropriateness and proportionality.

It might seem obvious that our quest for more knowledge follows proportionately our interests and what we deem significant according to our judgement. But this is often wrong and indeed the reverse is the case. What we deem and judge worthy of our interest and of significance can be led by, and not follow, the knowledge we have of it. This leads us to apportion our attention not on the basis of judgement and values which may guide us to their true significance, but on the basis of our happening to be made aware of something through our knowledge of it.

Furthermore, this effect is often not a one-off, but one that grows in an accelerated and compound fashion. Knowledge begets knowledge serially. The reverse, crassly put, is a case of the adage: out of sight, out of mind. One might say the availability of knowledge should have no effect on our normative judgements other things being equal; but the effect of the differentials of knowledge ensures that things are not equal in our minds.

Consider two examples.

Let us take two regions of the world A and B in which wars are taking place. For reasons that have nothing to do with the severity of the conflict, it turns out that knowledge about what is happening in A, including graphic film, is readily available, and it gets shown often through various outlets. This may be a matter of pure chance. In area B the news of the war is just the opposite, thin, and little is available to show what is going on. It is difficult without a deliberate countereffort not to judge that the most important war going on, the one that requires our normative judgement and moral attention, possibly outrage and action, is A.

Even if we are reminded of B, we may find ourselves paying lip service to equal outrage about it, and a deliberate mental effort for that is required in a way it is not with A, for with A outrage is fortified by the constant stream of knowledge which propagates the attention in our application of normative judgement and moral concern. And these disparities between A and B are not likely to lessen, for knowledge and attention draw forth more knowledge and attention. In the long, run fatigue and boredom might set in with A, but it might be a long time before that occurs, and longer still before the attention and stream of knowledge shift to B.

What this demonstrates is how the mere fact of knowledge modifies our normative judgement and our moral judgement, deforming them in a way the actual occurrences do not justify, as with the case of the wars A and B which are equally vicious and lethal, indeed one might suppose B is more so and the point still holds.



Consider two diseases C and D. They both have their severe effect and lethality on a proportion of those who succumb to them, we might suppose those equal, or even that the disease D might be worse. The government decides to publicise the risk from C. It collects and publishes figures frequently showing both its incidence and the deaths resulting from it, and other disease-related facts. Either by government fiat or by the very presence of the figures, C draws attention and greatly increases the news about it, so in due course individual, perhaps harrowing, cases are brought before people's eyes. However, D is left unreported. There is just no public information of its incidence or the number of fatalities, nor are there emotive follow-up individual stories. This leads to great concern for C, indeed a heightened fear of it, and this leads to all the considerations that applied to the war example, leading to significant differences in the normative judgements – for example the need to act with urgency and even at cost – and the moral preoccupation people have for C over D.

What can be done about the knowledge-effect?

The question is what is to be done about this judgemental and moral misdirection by the knowledge-effect. That is, what is to be done to prevent the knowledge we are

made aware of corrupting and unwarrantedly determining our normative judgements and moral judgements in a way the objective facts and morally relevant facts alone do not justify? For surely it should be the case that our normative judgements and moral judgements match in proportionality and concern the actual objective weight of value they have, and not be a result of the extraneous and accidental drive of the knowledge-effect.

It is sometimes said, indeed regarded as obvious, that unknowledge, or, as it often termed misinformation, is bad, to the point where its suppression is also obvious in its justification.

But as a matter of fact this need not be the case, as it may turn out that unknowledge balances and counters the excessive distortions of the knowledge-effect. It is not the ideal way of doing so as the effects of unknowledge are unpredictable and it might lead to equal distortions to our normative judgements and moral concerns. But it is worth noting that *de facto* unknowledge just might turn out to be beneficial, and we should be wary of the enthusiastic slogan that rigorous suppression must be a good thing and lead to better outcomes. However, the intentional propagation of unknowledge is neither the best way to deal with the knowledge-effect, nor the prime way proposed here.

To avoid confusion, the knowledge-effect is not the same as the often talked about closeness, kinship-effect, or closer-to-home effect. The latter concerns whether it is morally right to have more concern for those we have some kind of connection to, rather than those to whom we have none, where, or one might say despite, the objective circumstances being the same. The knowledge-effect might accidentally coincide with the close and distant distinction, there might even be some probability that it will, but the knowledge-effect is essentially distinct from the kinship-effect. I might after all through the knowledge-effect become greatly animated about the happenings in a remote country, and indeed individuals in it, while neglecting those in my local community and indeed my destitute brother.

The first thing to note is how difficult it might be to get a person to consider, let alone admit that their normative judgement including their moral judgement, might be portioned out wrongly and being misdirected by the knowledge-effect. The very nature of the way the knowledge-effect works is that it pushes people arationally – that is, it is a factual causal process – to misapply moral concern, and that makes it

difficult for people, who like to think their normative judgement and moral concern are determined entirely rationally and justifiably, to admit that they are subject to it. But let us say we have got someone at least to listen to us and see that there might be an issue, one that requires reflection and something to be done about it.

Then the best tack might be to acquire the habit of stepping back for a while and seeing whether the knowledge-effect is skewing one's judgement and the proper spread that our moral concern should justifiably have. Propagating a counter habit is the best way to oppose something arational, including an arational habit. For, as Hume argued, arguments only work against arguments. There is no point in trying to argue a tree out of falling on you.

Building on this counter good habit, one can then give it a rationale, showing that one's existing normative judgement and the moral distribution of one's concern cannot be fully justified.

Of course, one cannot be expected to judge or distribute one's moral concern perfectly – one is simply ignorant of what is going on across all possible cases – but that does not mean that one cannot and should not counter the sharpened awareness through knowledge bringing about skewed judgement and moral misemphasis and misdistribution. It might be said that we should not excuse doing something about an issue we know about, just because we don't know about other things. But my point is that if anything it is the other way around, that we should improve extending our actions and concern to things we do not know about, or know about far less, and not find ourselves doing that only to things we happen to know, possibly a lot, about.

One thing that can be pointed out is that excessive misapplied judgement and moral emphasis comes at a cost, an opportunity cost in fact, whereby judgements and actions, and the amount of moral concern, applied in one case, mean that other matters which we should judge as carrying more or equal weight are relatively or completely neglected.

Thus, while we judge that we should spend our resources, time and energy on war A and disease C, less or no, resources, time, and energy will be available for war B and disease D, which will be neglected. This will be as a result of the knowledge-

effect, not how the judgement should be made were we to consider each of these matters according to their true importance and value.

Another thing to point out that justifies responding to the deleterious consequences of the knowledge-effect is the way it can be used, and misused, by the misguided or malicious to manipulate our normative judgement and moral concern in a way not justified if a cooler judgmental and moral head were being applied.

The pursuance by government, or other powerful organization, to provide people with extensive knowledge of war A and disease C, as opposed to war B and disease D, in perhaps a deliberate attempt to influence our judgement for reasons of their own choosing, will again lead us not to judge as we should were we to look at matters more objectively and according to their actual importance and value.

The purpose of this essay is to point something out that it is easy to miss and fall into, something worth guarding against, and perhaps hard to admit to oneself. Once we are aware of the knowledge-effect we can take steps to have a more rationally justified view of states of affairs in the world. And that is for good judgement and morally speaking surely something worth doing.



[Dr John Shand](#) is a Visiting Fellow in Philosophy at the Open University. He studied philosophy at the University of Manchester and King's College, University of Cambridge. He has taught at Cambridge, Manchester and the Open University. The author of numerous articles, reviews, and edited books, his own books include, *Arguing Well* (London: Routledge, 2000) and *Philosophy and Philosophers: An Introduction to Western Philosophy*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2014).

Contact information:

- Dr John Shand, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, MK7 6AA, United Kingdom.
- <https://open.academia.edu/JohnShand>
- <https://fass.open.ac.uk/philosophy/people>
- <https://oro.open.ac.uk/view/person/jas66.html>

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