

# Tal and Comesaña on evidence of evidence

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R. Feldman defends a general principle about evidence the slogan form of which says that ‘evidence of evidence is evidence’ (cf. 2014: 284–99, 2011 and 2007: 194-214). B. Fitelson (2012: 85–88) considers three renditions of this principle and contends they are all falsified by counterexamples. Against both Feldman and Fitelson, J. Comesaña and E. Tal (2015: 557-59) show that the third rendition—the one actually endorsed by Feldman—isn’t affected by Fitelson’s counterexamples, but only because it is *trivially* true and thus uninteresting. Tal and Comesaña (2015) defend a fourth version of Feldman’s principle, which—they claim—‘has not yet been shown false’ (p. 16). Against Tal and Comesaña, I will show that this new version of Feldman’s principle is in fact *false*.

The third version of Feldman’s principle considered by Fitelson (2014) is this:

( $EEE_3$ ) If  $S_1$  possesses evidence,  $E_1$ , that supports the proposition that  $S_2$  possesses evidence,  $E_2$ , that supports  $P$ , then  $S_1$  possesses evidence,  $E_3$ , that supports  $P$ .

$EEE_3$  has been defended by Feldman (2011). Furthermore, Feldman (2014: 292) endorses a restatement of this principle that is only unimportantly different. Here is Fitelson’s alleged counterexample to  $EEE_3$ :  $S_1$ ’s background information says that a card  $c$  will be picked out randomly from a standard deck.  $S_1$  is then told that  $S_2$  knows which card  $c$  is exactly, and that:

( $E_1$ )  $c$  is a black card.

In these circumstances,  $E_1$  gives  $S_1$  some support for the proposition that  $S_2$  possesses the following information:

( $E_2$ )  $c$  is the ace of spades.

Furthermore,  $E_2$  entails and supports the proposition:

( $P$ )  $c$  is an ace.

In this setting, upon learning  $E_1$ ,  $S_1$  acquires evidence that supports the proposition that  $S_2$  possesses evidence  $E_2$  that supports  $P$ . So  $EEE_3$ 's antecedent is satisfied. However—Fitelson contends— $S_1$  doesn't have any evidence  $E_3$  that supports  $P$ . For we can stipulate that in this scenario all evidence  $S_1$  possesses about  $c$  is constituted by  $E_1$ , the proposition that  $S_2$  knows which card  $c$  is exactly, and any consequence of these two propositions. But none of these propositions is—according to Fitelson—evidence for  $P$ . Since  $EEE_3$ 's antecedent is satisfied but not its consequent,  $EEE_3$  is false.

Comesaña and Tal (2015) retort that this is no counterexample to  $EEE_3$ . For in this scenario—*pace* Fitelson— $S_1$  has some evidence  $E_3$  supporting  $P$ . For example,  $S_1$  believes the trivial consequence of  $E_1$ ,

$c$  is not the Jack of hearts,

which supports  $P$ . Comesaña and Tal emphasize that this upshot doesn't actually help Feldman because:

For any pair of propositions  $E$  and  $Q$  (about which the subject in question is not already certain), something entailed by  $E$  supports  $Q$ : for instance, the disjunction either  $E$  or  $Q$ . Therefore, Feldman's  $EEE_3$  is only trivially true, and so the fact that it is not refuted by Fitelson's case is irrelevant. (2015: 559, edited)

The moral is that Feldman can reject Fitelson's contention that  $EEE_3$  has a counterexample, but this is a Pyrrhic victory because  $EEE_3$ 's truth is immaterial to the general epistemological thesis that Feldman would like to substantiate. I endorse this conclusion.

To rescue the evidence-of-evidence-is-evidence principle from the triviality problem and other difficulties, Tal and Comesaña (2015: 14) propose replacing  $EEE_3$  with this principle:

$(EEE_4)$  For all  $E$  and  $Q$ , if (i)  $E$  is evidence that there is some evidence for  $Q$  and (ii)  $E$  is not a defeater for the support that the proposition that there is evidence for  $Q$  provides for  $Q$ , then  $E$  is evidence for  $Q$ .

In  $EEE_4$ , 'evidence' means any *true* proposition regardless of its being possessed by a subject. Since Feldman (2014: §15.2) thinks of evidence as a proposition possessed by a subject,  $EEE_4$  may be unsuitable to render the principle he has in mind.  $EEE_4$  is afflicted by a more serious problem: it is

not trivially true but just *false*. For there are many pairs of ordinary propositions  $E$  and  $Q$  (about which we are uncertain) that satisfy  $EEE_4$ 's antecedent but not  $EEE_4$ 's consequent.

Take  $E$  and  $Q$  from two disparate domains—for instance,  $E =$  ‘Aristotle used to snore’ and  $Q =$  ‘There is a mouse in my house’. Even so,  $E$  and  $Q$  satisfy (i) because  $E$  is evidence that there is some evidence for  $Q$ —namely, any (uncertain) proposition  $E^*$  that entails both  $E$  and  $Q$  (e.g. the conjunction  $E \& Q$ ). This is so because  $E^*$  entails  $E$ . Thus  $E$  is evidence for  $E^*$ . (As  $E^*$  entails  $E$ ,  $E$  confirms  $E^*$  in the sense that  $\Pr(E^*|E) > \Pr(E^*)$ , if  $\Pr(E^*) > 0$  and  $\Pr(E) < 1$ .) Furthermore,  $E^*$  entails  $Q$ . Thus  $E^*$  is evidence for  $Q$ . But  $E$  and  $Q$  also satisfy (ii), for it is intuitively true that  $E$  is not a defeater for the support that the proposition that there is evidence for  $Q$  provides for  $Q$ .

A way to flesh out this intuition is the following: the *existential* proposition that there is evidence for  $Q$  can be construed as a *disjunction* each disjunct of which states that [ $E_n$ , and  $E_n$  supports  $Q$ ] for any relevant  $E_n$ .  $E$  would be a defeater for the support that this disjunction provides for  $Q$  only if  $E$  were a defeater for the support that *all* or *most* of these disjuncts individually supply for  $Q$ . But we have no reason to believe this is the case. Rather, we have reasons to believe the opposite. Take for example  $E_n =$  ‘There are chew marks on the cupboard’. Clearly,  $E$  isn’t a defeater for the support that [there are chew marks on the cupboard, and the proposition that there are chew marks on the cupboard supports  $Q$ ] provides for  $Q$ . The same result obtains for any other  $E_n$  that stands for *typical* evidence for  $Q$ . The same happens in many cases in which  $E_n$  stands for *atypical* evidence for  $Q$ . Suppose for instance  $E_n = E^*$ .  $E$  isn’t a defeater for the support that [ $E^*$ , and  $E^*$  supports  $Q$ ] provides for  $Q$ . For the conjunction  $E \& [E^*, \text{ and } E^* \text{ supports } Q]$  supports  $Q$ . This is so because, since  $E^*$  entails  $E$ ,  $E \& [E^*, \text{ and } E^* \text{ supports } Q]$  is *logically equivalent* to [ $E^*$ , and  $E^*$  supports  $Q$ ], which supports  $Q$ .

In conclusion, since  $E$  and  $Q$  satisfy both (i) and (ii),  $EEE_4$ 's antecedent is satisfied. Nevertheless, since  $E$  is *not* evidence for  $Q$ ,  $EEE_4$ 's consequent is unsatisfied. Therefore,  $EEE_4$  is false.

**References**

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