

Having a Hunch

I.

The other evening while watching the news, I heard a loud noise outside. At first, there was a rustling sound. Then there was a sliding or scraping sound. Finally, there was a loud thud, a crash.

I was curious about the cause of this commotion. So, I went outdoors to investigate. What I found was that a large branch about 15 meters in length had broken off at its base from a neighboring eucalyptus. It had fallen in such a way that the base of the branch was embedded in the ground. The base of the branch was about a third of a meter across. The branch itself was tilted at a 45-degree angle. The top of the branch was firmly wedged in forks of branches of two smaller trees.

In going outside to find out what made the noise, I conducted an inquiry. I did not know what made the noise. I went to have a look. I observed the branch in its new position. As a result, I came to know that it was the falling limb that had made the noise.

I started in a position of ignorance. I conducted an inquiry. I observed the relevant evidence. I found out what caused the noise. The inquiry was complete. At that time, I knew what caused the noise.

Here the process is a process of inquiry which moves from ignorance to knowledge. I start with ignorance. I conduct an inquiry. I wind up with knowledge.

But there is a hitch. I had a hunch it might have been a falling branch.

II.

It was quite a strong hunch. I live in a forest. Eucalypts sometimes drop major branches. It had been hot. Eucalypts are known to drop branches as a result of the heat. So, I thought that it might be a branch.

Still, I wasn't certain. There were other possible explanations. It could have been a drop bear, but they are rare as hen's teeth.¹ An asteroid strike was unlikely. An earthquake? But the house didn't shake. Perhaps a car had gone down the ravine across the road (it has happened before). But there was no sound of skidding tires, smashed fence posts, crumpling metal, breaking glass or human voices.

So, I had a hunch, quite a strong one, that a branch had fallen. But I was not certain. I needed to check. I needed to have a look to see if I could determine the cause. I walked in the direction of the noise and saw the fallen branch. It was just on dark. So, I waited until dawn to check it out in detail.

III.

In an inquiry such as this one, there is a practical component. To see what made the noise, I went outside. Rather than head down the drive, I went up the drive behind the house to look in the paddock next door. That was because I thought the sound came from that direction. I walked in

¹ The drop bear (*Thylarctos plummetus*) is a rare and possibly mythical relative of the koala that inhabits dense eucalypt forests, where it drops from great height onto unsuspecting tourists. See Middleton (2021).

the direction that I thought the noise had come from and I looked toward the paddock once I got to where I could see the paddock.

This shows that inquiry involves, or may involve, a practical component. One engages in a series of actions in order to conduct the inquiry. I went outside and looked toward the paddock to determine the source of the noise. But the bodily movements involved did not in themselves constitute the inquiry (cf. Friedman 2019, p. 297). I had made similar movements countless times before over the years without necessarily inquiring into anything. It was the fact that I was trying to determine what had made the sound that made these movements into components of an act of inquiry.

Having seen the fallen branch, I knew what caused the noise. Given the evidence, I knew what the cause was. But still I returned the following morning to check it out further. Why? Was I double-checking or re-checking? Well, in a sense, yes, but not to determine the source of the noise. When I went back at first light to check the branch, I was more interested in what to do next. How big was it? How firmly wedged was it? Was it safe? Would I be able to cut it down with my chainsaw? Or would I need to call the arborist?

These were the questions before my mind when I went back to check the tree in the morning. I was not checking again to make sure that it was the branch that had made the crashing sound. I knew what made the crashing sound. But now I had other questions to resolve, ones that related to what I should do next.

IV.

Much of what I have just said is familiar ground from the current literature on the nature of inquiry. Inquiry is a process that moves from ignorance to knowledge. It seeks to answer a question (e.g., what made that noise?). An inquiry has an aim (e.g., to find out the source of the noise). It may involve practical activity (e.g., going to look). Sometimes we double-check, though in this case my double-checking was not strictly double-checking, since it was in service of different questions.

What is not so familiar is the status of the hunch.

According to Jane Friedman (2019, p. 303), when we conduct an inquiry, we should suspend belief. We do not genuinely conduct an inquiry if we already have a belief about the matter at hand. There is something wrong with conducting an inquiry into some matter if I have already formed a belief with respect to that matter. Thus, I should not have gone out to determine the cause of the noise if I believed or knew that a falling branch had made the noise. If I knew or believed this, I would have had no need to make the inquiry. It would have been inappropriate for me to do so. It is irrational to conduct an inquiry into a matter about which one already believes or knows the answer. It is not irrational to conduct the inquiry if the belief is suspended.

This doesn't sit quite right with me. I did not outright believe that it was a falling branch that had caused the noise. I was not completely confident that the cause was a falling branch. I had made no commitment to that precise belief. I had not made up my mind. That is why I went outside to investigate. But I did have a hunch that it was a falling branch that made the noise.

Is the hunch a belief?

V.

Here is my best stab at what the hunch amounted to. My hunch that a falling branch made the noise was a belief that it was probably a branch that made the noise. This is not the belief that a falling branch made the noise. That belief was suspended until I saw the fallen branch. Instead, the belief was about the probability or likelihood (we may be loose about terminology here) that it was a falling branch that made the sound. This was not partial belief (less than full confidence) that a falling branch made the sound (that belief was suspended). It was outright belief that it was probable that a falling branch made the sound (that belief was not suspended).

There is a (physical) context. I live in a forest. The trees among which I live often drop branches. On hot days, eucalypts sometimes drop branches. I am familiar with many of the noises that occur around the house. I know many of the bird calls. I know what wind in the trees sounds like. I know the sounds that come from the neighboring properties and the road. Most importantly, I have heard the sound that branches make when they fall on previous occasions.

That context informs my belief-formation. The beliefs that I form in the circumstances in which I find myself are guided by beliefs and knowledge that I have about my surroundings. It's because I live in a forest and am aware of what goes on around me that I formed the belief that it was likely that a falling branch had made the noise.

That belief, the belief that it was likely that a falling branch made the noise, was the hunch that I had about the cause of the noise.

What role did the hunch play? I had not yet formed the belief that the falling branch made the noise. But the hunch that a branch made the noise served as a guide to my inquiry. The inquiry led to the belief that the falling branch made the noise. But the inquiry itself was guided by the

hunch. It was because of the hunch that I went outside to investigate. It was the hunch that prompted and guided the actions that I undertook to make the inquiry.

In what I have just said, I have written in descriptive mode. I have described the way in which the surroundings in which I live shaped my hunch about the falling branch. But Friedman's point about suspension of belief in inquiry is a normative one. So, the description of the circumstances that inform my hunch may seem to miss the point. I do not think that it does. It seems entirely appropriate, indeed rational, for those circumstances to inform my hunch and for the hunch to guide my inquiry.

VI.

The suggestion I venture to offer is that in at least some cases hunches play and rightly play a role in our inquiries. We may suspend belief about the precise matter into which we inquire, as I did about whether a falling branch made the noise. But if we inquire based on a hunch, as I did into the noise the other evening, our inquiry is and should be guided by belief. In this case, my inquiry was guided by the belief that it was probably a falling branch that made the noise. And that was entirely appropriate from a rational point of view.

Inquiries made based on hunches are not inquiries in which all relevant beliefs are suspended. Nor should they be.

References

Friedman, Jane (2019), 'Inquiry and Belief', *Nous* 53: 2, 296-315

Middleton, Amy (2021), 'Drop bears target tourists, study says', *Australian Geographic* 1/04/2021, <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/news/2021/04/drop-bears-target-tourists-study-says/>