On Believing and Being Convinced

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Abstract. Our doxastic states are our belief-like states, and these include *outright* doxastic states and *degreed* doxastic states. The former include believing that *p*, thinking that *p*, being sure that *p*, being certain that *p*, and doubting that *p*. The latter include degrees of confidence, credences, and perhaps some phenomenal states. But we also have *conviction* (being convinced *simpliciter* that *p*) and *degrees of conviction* (being *more or less* convinced that *p*). This element shows: how and why *all* of the outright doxastic states mentioned above can be reduced to conviction thresholds; what degrees of conviction fundamentally are (degreed reliance-dispositions); why degrees of conviction are not credences; when suspending a belief is compatible with continuing to believe; and the surprising extent to which Kant endorsed the theory of conviction that emerges in this volume.

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For my German colleagues, who warmly welcomed me into their rich intellectual community

1. Introduction

The study of belief and its norms of rationality is a central part of contemporary epistemology. But belief is just one of many doxastic states. When it comes to the class of doxastic states, epistemologists commonly distinguish between our *outright* doxastic states and our *degreed* doxastic states. The outright doxastic states include believing that p, thinking that p, having the opinion that p, being sure that p, being certain that p, and doubting that p. Our degreed doxastic states include degrees of confidence, credences, and certain degreed phenomenal states.

However, in addition to the outright doxastic states mentioned above we also have **conviction**, i.e. the state of being convinced (*simpliciter*) that something is the case. And in addition to the degreed states mentioned above we have **degrees of conviction**, i.e. being *more or less* convinced that something is the case. The concept of conviction was central to Kant's way of thinking about our doxastic states. However, conviction has not been regarded as a distinctive doxastic mental state in recent philosophy of mind and epistemology. The aim of this volume is to locate and defend the distinctive place of conviction and its degrees among our doxastic states.

When it comes to our doxastic states there are two kinds of questions we can ask. We can ask questions about their nature:

Nature Question. For any agent S and doxastic state D, what is it for S to be in state D?

But we can also ask questions about their structure:

Structural Question. For any doxastic states $D1…Dn$, how are $D1…Dn$ related to each other?

Section 2 begins with a suggestive Kantian answer to the structural question. It then provides evidence for a version of a Kantian picture on which we have at least three outright doxastic states, where thinking is the logically weakest state, certainty is the logically strongest state, and conviction stands between them. A version of Foley's (1992) reductive Lockean approach to our outright doxastic states is considered. On this view, we can account for all our outright doxastic states in terms of *confidence thresholds*. This view is rejected, owing to the psychological possibility of having a very high degree of confidence in p while failing to believe, or think, or be convinced that p.

Section 3 provides an alternative view. It demonstrates the foundations for thinking that conviction comes in degrees and shows how degrees of conviction provide what is needed for a distinctive Kantian Threshold View of our outright doxastic states. For some readers, the Kantian Threshold View will not appear very different from its Lockean counterpart. This is likely owed to the following presupposition:

Conviction-Confidence Identity. Degrees of conviction just are degrees of confidence.

But this presupposition is plagued with problems. However, to appreciate these problems we first need to answer the Nature Question in regard to degrees of conviction. Section 4 does this, arguing that one's degree of conviction in *p* is, roughly, the strength of one's disposition to rely on *p*.

Section 5 defends the *sui generity* of degrees of conviction. In particular, this section explains how and why degrees of conviction separate from degrees of confidence (credences) and other degreed doxastic states, including felt degrees of confidence, the feeling of conviction, and degrees of revisability. It also provides an ecumenical suggestion about how best to understand talk of 'degrees of belief'.

Section 6 uses facts about masking dispositions to explain how and why we can *simultaneously* believe (/think, /be convinced, /be certain) that *p* while also suspending these very states. This is a significant result as it's usually assumed that suspending an attitude involves *lacking* that attitude, an idea that has been used to motivate dilemmas of rationality. But if belief and the suspension of belief are compatible states, then once-paradoxical cases need no longer be regarded as paradoxical.

Section 7 turns to historical questions about the extent to which Kant was himself a 'Kantian' in our sense. It turns out that Kant's theory of doxastic states was surprisingly Kantian. Not only does Kant prominently discuss conviction (*simpliciter*), there is also some evidence that he thought about other doxastic states – such as opinion and certainty – in terms of degrees of conviction. Moreover, his theory of degrees of conviction is open to (or at least not in tension with) the dispositional analysis of degrees of conviction.