On Believing and Being Convinced

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Book Summary. The study of belief and its norms of rationality is central to 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 *graded* doxastic states. The outright doxastic states include *believing that p*, *thinking that p*, *having the opinion that p, being sure that p* and *being certain that p,* while the graded doxastic states include *degrees of confidence, credences*, and perhaps certain degreed phenomenal states. But in addition to the standard doxastic states mentioned above we also have *conviction* – i.e. the state of being convinced that something is the case. The concept of conviction was central to Kant's way of thinking about outright doxastic states. However, conviction has not been regarded as a theoretically distinctive, doxastic mental state concept in recent philosophy of mind and epistemology. But there are a number of reasons to think that conviction plays a central role in understanding the nature of *all* of the outright doxastic states mentioned above. Linguistic evidence from both English and German strongly suggests that conviction comes in *degrees* and that the fundamentality of conviction is part of our folk theory of mind. This book will explain the variety of reasons there are to think that degrees of conviction plays a central role in understanding (i) the nature of *all* of the *outright* doxastic states mentioned above, (ii) the relation between outright conviction and belief, and (iii) how degrees of conviction are distinct from familiarly referenced degreed doxastic states (degrees of confidence, credences, and other relevant degreed phenomenal states). This book goes on to introduce readers to the widely held idea that doxastic states are related to dispositions to rely on propositions, and shows how this holds a key to providing an adequate metaphysical account of degrees of conviction, and thereby an adequate metaphysical account of our outright doxastic states. An upshot of this is the emergence of an often overlooked species of the suspension of our outright states, one that yields new theoretical options for epistemologists wrestling with old problems.

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Chapter 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 *graded* doxastic states. The outright doxastic states include *believing that p*, *thinking that p*, *having the opinion that p,* and *being certain that p,* while our graded doxastic states include *degrees of confidence, credences*, and perhaps certain degreed phenomenal states. But in addition to the standard doxastic states mentioned above we also have *conviction*, i.e. the state of *being 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 element is to locate and defend the distinctive place of conviction and its degrees among our doxastic attitudes.

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?

Chapter 2 begins with a suggestive Kantian answer to the structural question in regard to our outright doxastic states. The chapter then provides linguistic evidence and case-based evidence for a version of that Kantian picture on which we have at least three outright doxastic states, where thinking is the logically weakest, certainty is the logically strongest, with conviction standing in 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 considered and then rejected owing to the psychological possibility of having a very high degree of confidence in *p*, while failing to believe that *p*.

Chapter 3 provides an alternative to the Lockean 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. To appreciate its problems we first provide an account of degrees of conviction. This is the work of Chapter 4 which leverages widely shared insights about the connection between belief and dispositions to rely on propositions. Together with various ways of connecting belief to conviction, we provide a metaphysical theory of degrees of conviction. The view that emerges is, roughly, that one's degree of conviction in *p* is the strength of one's disposition to rely on *p*.

Chapter 5 tackles the presupposition above, and defends the *sui generity* of degrees of conviction. In particular, this chapter explains how and why degrees of conviction separate from degrees of confidence (credences) and other degreed doxastic notions, including felt degrees of confidence, felt veridicality, and the feeling of conviction. It also provides an ecumenical suggestion about how best to understand talk of 'degrees of belief'.

Chapter 6 turns to some historical questions about the extent to which Kant was himself a 'Kantian' in our sense. A central idea that emerges here is a novel way of appreciating the insight that believing and thinking are logically equivalent despite being distinct kinds of states. An insight that only comes into view once we've sought to integrate Kant's genus-species claim concerning *assent* (*Fürwahrhalten*) and other doxastic states.

Chapter 7 takes up a question about the suspension of our outright states: can we simultaneously believe (think, be convinced, be certain) that *p* while also suspending these states? If our outright doxastic states are partially dispositional states, then we should answer this question positively. In particular, we will argue that for every outright doxastic state, *D*, weaker than a modally robust state of certainty – named 'absolute certainty' – it is possible to take that *D* towards *p* while also suspending that state. This is a significant result as it's usually assumed that suspending an

attitude involves *lacking* that attitude. For example, it's usually assumed that believing that *p* and suspending belief that *p* are not compatible mental states. Thus, many have assumed that being required to suspend belief that *p* is incompatible with being permitted to believe *p*. Some have used this 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.