Knowledge Still Comes First

Mona Simion

# For *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, 3rd edition, eds. Ernest Sosa, Matthias Steup, John Turri, and Blake Roeber, Wiley-Blackwell

My argument in my ‘Knowledge Comes First’ to the conclusion that justification turns on knowledge crucially relies on my premise 5: the claim that belief formation systems successfully represent if and only if they generate knowledge. In his excellent paper, Aidan McGlynn makes several points against my argument in general, and my premise 5 in particular. Addressing all of Aidan’s sharp points is not achievable in the space I have left; for this reason, I will focus on what I take to be his main worry.

In arguing in favour of 5, I, among other things, put forth an analogy between knowledge and successful representation: both, I argue, are incompatible with intervening luck. Chisholm’s perceiver of a sheep in the field doesn’t know there’s a sheep in the field. Similarly, a dancer that, as she dances, happens to be drawing a line in the sand that looks just like someone she knows does not thereby successfully represent that person.

Aidan rightfully points out that more is needed for this analogy to do the needed work: after all, knowledge, many think, is also incompatible with environmental (or circumstantial) luck. In contrast, though, one might think that Fake Barns cases are cases of successful barn representation.

Here, I aim to complete my analogy by arguing that there is no successful representation in Fake Barns cases, and thus that, just like knowledge, successful representation is incompatible with both intervening and environmental luck. I argue that the epistemological significance of epistemic risk gives us gives us strong reason to endorse a knowledge norm of belief.[[1]](#footnote-1) If that is true, and if, plausibly, a belief formation system only successfully represents when it forms good beliefs – i.e., beliefs that meet the norm of belief – it follows that Fake Barn cases are not cases of successful representation. If so, knowledge and successful representation go hand in hand, and premise 5 is vindicated. Here it goes:

There are three ways for some *x* to be too *y*. First, it can be that *x* is too *y* for a particular purpose present at a particular context; take a kitchen knife, for instance. Your regular kitchen knife is going to be too blunt for performing brain surgery with it. Conscientious surgeons will avoid using a kitchen knife to this aim; if offered one, they would decline. While perfectly fine for all their common, kitchen-related functions, kitchen knives tend to not score well on sharpness when in an operating room.

When several purposes are salient at the context, something *x* can bee too *y* all-present-purposes-considered, while, at the same time, not too *y* for some of them. For instance, in the example above, your regular kitchen knife will not be too blunt to spread butter on the surgeon’s toast, or to give the nurse a new haircut – assuming that such purposes would, strangely enough, be present at the context - , while it would remain too blunt to be used in the operating room, all-purposes-considered, in virtue of its being too blunt for the overriding purpose – that of performing brain surgery. Again, conscientious surgeons will avoid using a kitchen knife at this context.

Last but not least, some *x* can be too *y* *simpliciter*. A kitchen knife, for instance, can be too blunt, *simpliciter*. That is, too blunt for a good kitchen knife, too blunt for a good token of its type. The sense of goodness here is attributive (as in (Geach 1956)). A blunt kitchen knife can be good enough for a bunch of purposes, while still not being a good token of its type. It can be sharp enough for playing house with it, or for being exhibited in a museum, while still being too blunt *simpliciter*, i.e., too blunt to be a good kitchen knife. Furthermore, it might be that, all-purposes-considered, at a particular context, it’s better to have a kitchen knife that is just so blunt: prudentially, because I won’t cut myself while cooking, aesthetically, because it looks prettier, morally, because its bluntness will prevent a murder from being committed… Still, the said knife will remain too blunt to be a good kitchen knife, that is, a good token of its type.

With this in mind, consider:

*FAKE BARNS* (adapted from Goldman 1976). Henry is driving in the countryside, looking at objects in fields. He sees what looks exactly like a barn. Accordingly, he believes that there is a barn in front of him. Now, that is indeed the case. But what he does not realize is that this county is populated with many fake barns — mere barn facades that look exactly like real barns when viewed from the road.

First, I submit that there is a strong intuition that Henry’s belief is too risky. To see this, note that, if we were to find out that Henry, unbeknownst to him, is visiting Fake Barn County, we would be inclined to warn him: ‘If you see something that looks like a barn, don’t believe it, it’s likely just a façade!’ Given the description of the case, plausibly, the intuitive appropriateness of this instance of warning is sourced in the belief at issue being too risky. Note, also, that an even more explicit warning along the lines of ‘Don’t trust you’re seeing barns, you run a high risk of being wrong!’ also seems perfectly appropriate.

In a similar fashion, if, unbeknownst to him, the surgeon would be handed a kitchen knife by a distracted nurse, we would be inclined to warn him: ‘Don’t try to cut into the patient, it’s likely not going to work!’ It is plausible that the intuitive appropriateness of this instance of warning is sourced in the knife at issue being too blunt for surgery. Note, also, that an even more explicit warning along the lines of ‘Don’t try to cut into the patient, the knife is very blunt!’ also seems perfectly appropriate.

Second, the intuition that Henry’s belief is too risky is vindicated by the main accounts of risk in the literature: on a probabilistic view (Hansson 2018), because the probability of getting it wrong is very high; on a modal view (Pritchard 2016), because the world at which Henry gets things wrong is too close.

Second, note that the ‘too risky’ at stake in *FAKE BARNS* is of the third variety identified above; that is, what is at stake is too risky *simpliciter*. After all, no particular purpose is present at the context; the case is not one where Henry is about to employ his belief that there is a barn in front of him for some aim or another. Henry does not plan to act on the relevant belief, base his decisions on it, tell anybody about this etc.

If that is the case, though, that is, if what is at stake is too risky *simpliciter*, then, just like in the case of the kitchen knife, it will regard attributive goodness; Henry’s belief will be too risky to be a good token of its type, that is, too risky to be a good belief.

Note also that, were Henry to know that there is a barn in front of him – that is, were he not to be in Fake Barns County – his belief would not bee too risky to be a good token of its type anymore.

If that is the case, on (I submit, very plausible) assumption that a belief complies with the norm of belief only if it is a good belief, it follows that one’s belief complies with the norm of belief only if knowledgeable.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In turn, if knowledge is the norm of belief, and if, plausibly, a belief formation system only successfully represents when it forms good beliefs – i.e., beliefs that meet the norm of belief – it follows that Fake Barn cases are not cases of successful representation. If so, knowledge and successful representation go hand in hand, and premise 5 is vindicated.

**References**

Benton, Matthew (2014). Knowledge Norms. Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. https://iep.utm.edu/kn-norms/

Geach, Peter (1956). Good and Evil. Analysis. Volume 17, Issue 5, 1 April 1957, Pages 103–111,

Hansson, Sven Ove (2018) Risk. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*(Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/risk/>.

Pritchard, Duncan (2016). Epistemic Risk. *Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 113, Issue 11: 550-571

Simion, M, Kelp, C. and Ghijsen, H. (2016). Norms of Belief. *Philosophical Issues*, eds. C. Kelp and J. Lyons, vol. 26(1): 375-392.

Williamson, Timothy (2000). *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1. See (Benton 2014) for controversies over the knowledge norm of belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Williamson 2000 for the first defence of this claim and Simion et al (2016) for further development. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)