

WHY KNOWLEDGE MIGHT NOT ENTAIL BELIEF

(Forthcoming in *Southwest Philosophical Studies Vol. 43*)

Pranav Ambardekar

I

The entailment thesis holds that knowledge entails belief. Most epistemologists take it to be obvious.¹ Now, there are two ways to argue against the entailment thesis: first, one can argue for a particular account of knowledge or belief such that the entailment thesis does not hold; second, one can provide an intuitive example of knowledge without belief. The second strategy was employed by Colin Radford.² In Radford's proposed counterexample, Jean – a French Canadian - is being quizzed by Tom on English history. The former earnestly avows that he knows nothing about English history. Jean requires prompts to answer questions, and even when he answers them he does so with hesitation. Jean is fairly certain that his answers are wrong. At the end, Jean gets five out of ten questions right. One of the questions he is asked is: when did Queen Elizabeth die? Jean answers (E): 'Queen Elizabeth died in 1603.' When told by Tom that his answer is right, Jean reports that he feels he might have "picked that up on a Shakespeare course or somewhere."

Many take Radford's claim *à propos* his example to be the following: Jean knows (E) but does not believe it.³ But Radford does not dwell on establishing the absence of belief, presumably because he takes Jean's behavior to be revealing. Likewise, no sustained defence of the presence of knowledge is offered: at a point Radford says we should think Jean knows because he remembers.

In light of all this, one plausible way to interpret a crucial part of Radford's argumentative strategy is to take him to be pushing the following move: an agent can know *p* without believing it when i) she has evidence that is sufficient to justify *p*, and ii) he is uncertain about the epistemic status of the evidence she possesses and *p*; the thought then is that we can infer disbelief from uncertainty, and knowledge from the possession of sufficient evidence. Interpreted this way, Radford's argumentative strategy faces several problems.

First, in the case Radford proposes, it's not clear that the agent possesses sufficient evidence to know *p*.⁴ Even if Radford's original case is improved upon to deliver the intuition that the agent has sufficient evidence for knowledge, his move still faces – and this is the second problem - the following dilemma: if the agent's uncertainty about the evidence he possesses and *p* is well grounded i.e. there is some reason that casts doubt on the proposition in question, thus acting as a defeater, then the agent does not really have sufficient evidence for knowledge; on the other hand, if the agent's uncertainty about the evidence he possesses and *p* is not well grounded i.e. there is no reason whatsoever for the agent to be uncertain about or disbelieve *p*, then the agent is irrational. Such irrationality might be a symptom of some deeper problem in the agent's cognitive apparatus, in which case it seems implausible to credit such an agent with knowledge. Either way, there is no knowledge.

The third problem is even more devastating: recently Jonathan Schaffer and David Rose have argued that even if there is knowledge in the kind of case that Radford proposes, there will always be dispositional belief.⁵ They make their point without offering a specific account of dispositional belief. The case they discuss is a slightly modified version of Radford's original case: in their case it is clear that the agent (Kate) possesses sufficient evidence, however, her recall capacities are compromised due to fear or stress. When asked about Queen Elizabeth's death, Kate answers correctly. Surely, Schaffer and Rose think, Kate does not *merely* guess in such cases. She gets the right answer because the information she possesses is unconsciously

guiding her behavior. In the absence of any other plausible explanation for Kate's behavior, an unconscious mechanism guiding her behavior has to be posited. They admit that there is no occurrent belief in Kate's case, as Kate does not consciously give assent to (E); nevertheless, they contend that there is dispositional belief due to the unconscious mechanism. Thus, Schaffer and Rose's argument takes the form of an inference to the best explanation hypothesis. So the most that Radford would have shown is that in the kind of cases he describes, the agents do not have occurrent belief. However, as Schaffer and Rose emphasize, that is not the epistemologically relevant notion of belief.

In this paper, by providing an improved version of Radford's proposed counterexample, I will show that Radford's strategy of providing an intuitive case of knowledge without belief can be salvaged from the aforementioned problems. Recall Radford's central move: the introduction of disbelief through uncertainty, even when the agent purportedly has sufficient evidence for knowledge. Instead of introducing uncertainty to get outright disbelief, I specify the agent's cognitive motivations differently: the agents in my proposed counterexample care more about avoiding false belief than believing in what is true. As we shall see later, this move allows me to avoid both the dilemma and the Schaffer and Rose kind of response. Ultimately, I will argue that there are cases where knowledge is followed by something (e.g. a mental state) that falls short of full belief (and not disbelief).

Here is the plan. In section II, I will begin by presenting what I take to be an improved version of Radford's counterexample to the entailment thesis. The crucial innovation has to do with a particular kind of agent: *cautious believers*. I will make explicit and briefly motivate the claims that I am committed to in introducing such agents. In section III, I will show how my case avoids Schaffer and Rose's response and the dilemma mentioned before. I will conclude by addressing an objection to my proposal, showing how the agent in my case satisfies a version of the basing requirement for knowledge, and stating what the main takeaway of this paper is.

II

Consider the case of Saraswati:

Saraswati. The recommended textbooks Saraswati had read for her history examination did not explicitly mention the year of Queen Elizabeth’s death. Instead, the author who had written the books mentioned in one of the books that: ‘Queen Elizabeth died in the early sixteen hundreds, in the year that the “Father of New France” sailed to Canada’; in another book on world history the author wrote: ‘Samuel de Champlain sailed to Canada a year before England had concluded the Treaty of London with Spain (1604).’ When Saraswati reads the question, “When did Queen Elizabeth die?” she feels a little annoyed. She says to herself, “Why wasn’t the year explicitly stated in those textbooks!” She entertains several years as possible answers but then entertains the following inference to the best explanation hypothesis in her mind:

P1: Queen Elizabeth died in the early sixteen hundreds, in the year that the “Father of New France” sailed to Canada. [at T1: entertains the proposition and consciously gives assent to it]

P2: Samuel de Champlain sailed to Canada a year before England had concluded the Treaty of London with Spain (1604). [at T2: entertains and assents]

P3: Engraved on the grand statue of Samuel de Champlain in Quebec is the word “Père.” [at T3: entertains and assents] {background knowledge}

From P1 through P3:

P4: “The Father of New France” is Samuel de Champlain. [at T4: entertains but does not assent]

From P1, P2 and P4:

(E): Therefore, Queen Elizabeth died in 1603. [at T5: entertains but does not assent]

Saraswati sees an entailment relationship between premises P1 through P4 and (E) but she suspends judgment about P4 and thus (E). Since there is just a minute remaining and she has to write down something, Saraswati writes down “1603” as the answer: she is, overall, more confident in (E) than not. After the exam, she rushes to a public library and borrows all the books which contain historical research on the early seventeenth century. When she reads that all twelve of them say that “The Father of New France” is Samuel de Champlain and that Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, she smiles and consciously gives assent to both P4 and (E).

Note: here are some premises, such that if they were all in Saraswati’s pool of evidence, her evidence would be sufficient (and not just barely sufficient to justify) to justify P4 and (E):

P5: There are many statues across Canada paying tribute to Samuel de Champlain.

P6: Part of the territory of what was “New France” now belongs to Canada.

P7: Samuel de Champlain was French.

P8: Samuel de Champlain made the first accurate map of what is today’s Canada’s east coast.

And had she read a sentence explicitly mentioning the identity of the two names “Father of New France” and “Samuel de Champlain” in a respected book on seventeenth century history, she would have overwhelming evidence for P4 and thus (E).

Saraswati is what I call a cautious believer in a forced choice situation. What features characterize such an agent in such a situation? First, she cares more about avoiding false belief than acquiring true belief. In his classic essay entitled “The Will to Believe,” William James pointed out that, broadly speaking, human beings can be motivated, in various degrees, by two kinds of epistemic goals: first, believing what is true and second, not believing what is false.⁶ The second goal can be achieved with respect to any given issue not just via outright disbelief,

but also via suspending judgment; whereas, to achieve the first goal suspending judgment will not do. Now, my claim is that it is plausible to hold that there can be cases like Saraswati's where one of these two cognitive motivations is predominant. This is an empirical claim – and although I do not offer an argument in favour of it here, I take it that Saraswati's case is as intuitively familiar as Radford's original case and this serves as a kind of *prima facie* justification.

Second, she has the ability to assess the epistemic status of her evidence i.e. what the evidence she has really amounts to. There are two pictures here, each compatible with the case I have offered: the ability she has will depend on the *kind* of cautious believer she is. On one picture – where a cautious believer is a virtuous epistemic agent – the agent has the ability to tell if the evidence she has for a given proposition *p* is barely sufficient for *p*. A virtuous epistemic agent, as Hume once said, proportions their beliefs to the evidence: so if the evidence for a certain proposition *p* is weak and insufficient for knowledge, a virtuous epistemic agent will not form the belief that *p*.

Now a brief but important detour: I hold that any given agent's pool of evidence regarding any given proposition *p* must fall under one of the four rubrics: insufficient evidence, barely sufficient evidence, sufficient evidence, and overwhelming evidence. Whatever one's preferred view about the nature of evidence is i.e. whether evidence is always propositional, what it means to *possess* evidence, and so on, if a component of that view is that evidence admits to degrees of strength, then I think that one should follow me in making the kind of fourfold classification made above. Instead of just making coarse-grained distinctions like weak and strong evidence for a particular proposition, we can make more fine-grained distinctions.

Back to virtuous epistemic agents: I take it that Saraswati counts as a virtuous epistemic agent because she suspends belief about (E) – recall that she does not give conscious assent to either P4 or (E) – as the evidence she has at her disposal is right on the knife’s edge. Although, intuitively, it is sufficient for knowledge it is only barely sufficient. Any less and she would not count as knowing (E). Might more evidence in favour of (E) come her way, so as to make it sufficient for knowledge, she will *not* suspend judgment about (E). This makes her virtuous, epistemically speaking.

On the second picture – where a cautious believer has a personality quirk – the agent has the ability to tell if the evidence she has for a given proposition p is *not* overwhelmingly in favour of it. Saraswati might be so passionate about history that she only consciously assents to claims that she knows have overwhelming evidence for them. Until a time when she is in possession of overwhelming evidence for (E), Saraswati suspends judgment and thereby does not give conscious assent to (E). Someone might object here that an agent who only consciously assents to propositions when the evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of them is irrational. This might be concerning since – as the second horn of the dilemma I presented before goes – this irrationality might be so central to the agent’s cognitive system that the agent could not be credited with knowledge. But this objection succeeds only if the kind of personality quirk I mentioned is pathological across domains of knowledge i.e. if with respect to any kind of knowledge, the agent suspends judgment when evidence is not overwhelming. On my picture, the agent only suspends judgment with respect to propositions that fall under one domain of knowledge e.g. historical knowledge.

The plausibility of these pictures hinges on the following claim: agents can possess the general ability to assess the epistemic status of the evidence at their disposal. Why think the claim above is true? Again, a *prima facie* defence: we cannot make sense of much of human learning without positing such an ability. Introspection on what one has learned (the

information one has acquired) and what it really amounts to, allows us not only to tell others about which domains of knowledge we are proficient or deficient in, but it also helps us selectively explore within and without domains of knowledge as per our goals. This ability might also be the causal basis of our confidence in asserting knowledge claims. In a nutshell, we are not mere computers which store and process information – we are capable of being aware (even if we are not always aware) of what that information really amounts to. Now, if it is plausible to hold that humans in general have such an ability then I think it is plausible to hold that some gifted humans might wield this ability better than others: they can tell if the evidence they have at their disposal is barely sufficient for, or if it is not overwhelmingly in favour of, some proposition *p*.

I now turn to how the counterexample offered in this section avoids the problems faced by Radford's original counterexample.

III

Recall Schaffer and Rose's response to Radford. On their view, Kate still believes in (E) because it is implausible to hold that she *merely* guessed: she got the answer right due to the unconscious mechanism guiding her behavior. The positing of dispositional belief serves well as a causal explanation of Kate's behavior. So why not think the same in Saraswati's case? In Saraswati's case, I contend that there is no need for the kind of explanation Schaffer and Rose are offering to account for her actions: there is a stepwise conscious process - laid out in terms of an inference to the best explanation hypothesis - that goes on in Saraswati's mind. It is plausible to hold that it is this conscious process that is causally responsible for Saraswati's proximate behavior: getting the answer right.

To this an objector might say: you seem to assume that the relevant disposition only manifests if the unconscious mechanism is in play; why not think instead that Saraswati's conscious process is itself a manifestation of the disposition?

My response is that what counts as a manifestation of the disposition will depend on the account of dispositional belief at play. The account at play here seems to be the following one: whatever else the account might hold, it holds that responding to a question as to whether *p* in a forced choice situation is sufficient for dispositional belief. I reject such an account of dispositional belief since it would fail to take seriously an agent's behavior that conflicts with *p*. For instance, in Saraswati's case, it's clear that she does not have cognitive dispositions that accord with *p*: she fails to consciously assent to (E). Moreover, it could be that she lacks other relevant dispositions: like the disposition to place a bet on whether (E), the disposition to publicly affirm that (E) after the exam in front of friends, and other behavioral dispositions.

Saraswati's case is a little complicated: she has some dispositions that accord with *p*, and others that do not. Nevertheless, I take it that even on more attractive liberal dispositionalist accounts of belief - like the one defended by Eric Schwitzgebel - Saraswati does not count as believing (E).⁷ While it also follows from the account that she does not lack belief entirely, that is not a problem for someone arguing against the entailment thesis. For knowledge will be followed by something that falls short of full belief and so the entailment does not hold.⁸

We can now see how my counterexample avoids the dilemma faced by Radford's. In introducing uncertainty to get outright disbelief, Radford invited the charge that the agent is irrational not to believe if the evidence is sufficient for knowledge. But with Saraswati, there is no outright disbelief: the agent merely suspends judgment about *p*, while acting in ways that both accord and conflict with *p*. If you will, Saraswati is in a mental state that is distinct both from belief and disbelief. And if any of the two kinds of pictures I have presented are plausible,

Saraswati is not irrational for neither virtuous epistemic agents nor agents with minor personality quirks are irrational.

If Saraswati's pool of evidence is sufficient - even if *barely* so - to justify (E), then *were she* to form the belief that (E), she would be propositionally justified in doing so. Many philosophers think that knowledge is intimately connected with the notion of doxastic justification, which comes apart from propositional justification. The thought is that a belief must be held not only because evidence supports it, but also for that same reason and not some bad reason. Now, of course Saraswati will fail to be doxastically justified in this way: she does not form the belief that (E), and so the *belief* cannot be properly based on her evidence. She does, however, satisfy what could be seen as a version of the basing requirement: her behavioral dispositions that accord with p are causally linked to a *conscious* episode involving reasoning (an inference to the best explanation). And this is exactly the kind of thing that her belief - were she to have formed it - should have been based on were it to be counted as properly based. Thus, we have stronger reason to think that knowledge is present in my counterexample, as opposed to Radford's.⁹

The main take-away from this paper is the following: caution need not destroy knowledge. I think that Radford was right to think that there is a way to specify an agent's psychology such that belief would not follow knowledge. However, he was wrong in thinking that throwing uncertainty into the picture would do the job. Caution, I have suggested, is a more robust candidate to do the job. Thus, if the counterexample offered in this paper is *prima facie* plausible, then I take it that the Radfordian project is still alive. The next step would be to show that *all* (save belief, of course) the plausible pre-conditions for knowledge can be satisfied in cases involving cautious believers in forced choice situations.

NOTES

-
- ¹ For a *Wittgensteinian* pushback against the entailment thesis, see chapters 4 and 5 in Peter Hacker's *The Intellectual Powers: A study of Human Nature* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).
- ² Even his title heralds his argumentative strategy. Colin Radford calls his paper "Knowledge – By Examples," *Analysis* (1966) 1-11.
- ³ See for instance the introduction in Blake Myers-Schulz and Eric Schwitzgebel's "Knowing that P without Believing that P," *Noûs* (2013) 371-384.
- ⁴ For a brief review of responses to Colin Radford's purported counterexample, see Jonathan Ichikawa and Matthias Steup's "The Analysis of Knowledge," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/knowledge-analysis/>. (2018).
- ⁵ See Jonathan Schaffer and David Rose's "Knowledge Entails Dispositional Belief," *Philosophical Studies* (2013) 19–50.
- ⁶ William James, "The Will to Believe," reprinted in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1897).
- ⁷ See Eric Schwitzgebel's "A Phenomenal, Dispositional Account of Belief," *Noûs* (2002) 249-275.
- ⁸ For a discussion on the possibility of 'in-between believing,' see Eric Schwitzgebel's "Acting Contrary to our Professed Beliefs or the Gulf Between Occurrent Judgment and Dispositional Belief," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (2010) 531-553.
- ⁹ Also, Saraswati ought to know: she is, after all, the goddess of knowledge.