

Comments: Jennifer Nagel and Ben Holguín on Weak Belief vs. Strong Belief

DANIEL.HOEK@VT.EDU, EASTERN APA, JANUARY 2025

Question: *Which one of weak and strong belief carves our psychology at its joints?*

- ▶ The linguistic evidence seems to point one way, the cognitive evidence another.

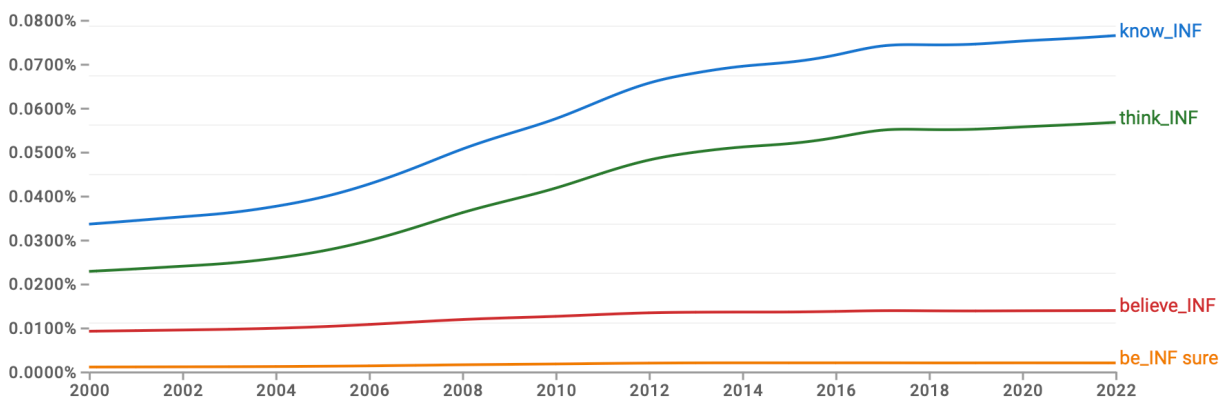
Characterising Weak & Strong Belief

- ▶ **Weak belief.** An agent weakly believes the answer A to Q when A is entailed by their *best guess* about the answer to Q .
- ▶ **Strong belief.** An agent strongly believes P when they *take themselves to know* that P .

Strong Belief is Explanatory and Theoretically Central

Strong but not Weak Belief:

- Settles a question.** One can weakly believe A in answer to Q while continuing to wonder, be curious, and generally be unsure about Q .
- Can be the **culmination of inquiry**. (C.S. Peirce identified Strong Belief — not knowledge — as the *aim* of inquiry.)
- Puts agents (subjectively) **in a position to assert** A outright and to assent to A .
- Serves as a rational basis for action** more broadly. Weak Belief is consistent with hedging against A and even straight-up betting against A .
- Serves as a basis for deductive inferences.** Weak beliefs cannot be put together, and their authority is confined to the question they answer.



Google Ngram: In Google's book corpus, the verb "think" (with conjugations) is over four times as frequent as the verb "believe", sixty times more frequent than "be sure", and about a quarter less frequent than the verb "know".

Thinking is Basic, and Thinking is Weak

The linguistic evidence shows that *believing that* is a less basic concept than *believing that* (insofar as we treat them as a distinct concepts in the first place).

Thinking cannot be the doxastic analogue of knowledge, given that *being sure* is a doxastic attitude much more closely aligned with knowledge:

- ▶ “Know” entails the doxastic “being sure”, but “think” does not:
 - 1) # Ashley knew that otters were mammals, but she wasn’t sure.
 - 2) ✓ Ashley thought that otters were mammals, but she wasn’t sure.
- ▶ Evidential standards for knowing and being sure align. Evidential standards for knowing and thinking do not align:
 - 3) ✓ Jim knows Jane bought most of the lottery tickets than anybody else, so he thinks/reckons/guesses she will win.
 - 4) ?? Jim knows Jane bought more lottery tickets than anybody else, so he knows/is sure she will win.
 - 5) ✓ Jim knows Jane bought *all* the lottery tickets, so he knows / is sure she will win.
 - 6) ?? Jim knows Jane bought *all* the lottery tickets, so he thinks she will win.

So... Is *Thinking* A Mistake?

So far it looks like:

- ▶ Jennifer is right that Strong Belief is a more joint-carving notion than Ben’s Weak Belief.
- ▶ Ben is right that folk psychology *treats* Weak Belief as the more central concept.

If these are both true, that means it is a huge *mistake* in focus on *thinking*. We shouldn’t care what people think — we should care what they’re sure of!

Or... could it be that Weak Belief is in fact psychologically central in ways that we have not yet fully appreciated?