

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

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Thank you both for those wonderful, thought-provoking papers! I'm going to focus my comments on the question *which one of weak and strong belief is the (more) natural kind?* Or if you prefer *which of these concepts carves our psychology at its joints?* This seems to me an important question, and one that highlights a common theme running through both these papers. It is also something I feel a bit torn about myself, as considerations on both sides seem extremely compelling to me: compelling to the point that I would consider them entirely decisive — but for the other side.

And as we'll see in a moment when we look at those considerations, I don't think it's at all a coincidence that a cognitive scientist and a philosopher of language should come down on different sides of this issue. So that's why being in the room with these two philosophers in particular seems like a great opportunity to get a little more clarity on this issue.

So what I'll do is to assemble some reasons from each paper that point I think very strongly in both directions on this issue. And then I'll end in a state of *aporia* that I hope the discussion will help to resolve.

Characterising Weak and Strong Belief

First, to set the stage: the distinction between weak and strong belief is typically made in terms of their different relations to *credence*. But I find the characterisation of weak and strong belief in terms of their respective relationships to *guessing* and *knowing* to be more informative:

- ▶ **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* (or: when an agent knows that *P*, for all they know; or: strong belief is the non-factive/doxastic analogue of knowledge).

Now advocates of weak and strong belief can agree that both these attitudes exist, and they can also agree on many of the other features said to separate the two attitudes. E.g. the advocate of weak belief can say: "The attitude some theorists call 'strong belief' really exists — but in ordinary English that's called 'being sure'." And the advocate of strong belief can say: "The attitude some theorists call 'weak belief' really exists — but it's called 'guessing'."

What the camps *disagree* on, in the first instance, is which of the two concepts is expressed by the attitude verb "believe". But this dispute is also a bit of a proxy for the more substantive issue lurking underneath, about which of these attitudes is more basic and fundamental.

Strong Belief is Explanatory and Theoretically Central

When it comes to that issue, one thing that favours Strong Belief over Weak Belief right off the bat is its close proximity to *knowledge*. I think one thing Ben and Jennifer agree on is that knowledge is a very basic mental state, playing a central organising role in the functional scheme of our psychology. By contrast, Weak Belief is characterised by reference to *guessing* — which on its face does not look to play an especially significant role in inquiry. So if I had to venture a guess on just this basis, my money would be on Strong Belief.

That impression is confirmed when we consider the theoretical roles of Strong Belief and Weak Belief more broadly. As Ben acknowledges, Strong but not Weak Belief:

- a) **Settles a question.** One can weakly believe *A* in answer to *Q* while continuing to wonder, be curious, and generally be unsure about *Q*.
- b) Can be the **culmination of inquiry**. (C.S. Peirce identified Strong Belief — not knowledge — as the *aim* of inquiry.)
- c) Puts agents (subjectively) **in a position to assert** *A* outright and to assent to *A*.
- d) **Serves as a rational basis for action** more broadly. Weak Belief is consistent with hedging against *A* and even straight-up betting against *A*.
- e) **Serves as a basis for deductive inferences.** Weak beliefs cannot be put together, and their authority is confined to the question they answer. (Or Else you could e.g. combine your rational held Weak Beliefs that *Seabiscuit will win the race* and that *Some other horse will win the race* to conclude that *The moon is made of green cheese*.)

Ben sums up (c), (d) and (e) by saying that Weak Belief is essentially *epiphenomenal*: other than being introspectively accessed by the believer, and perhaps first-personally reported, Ben's version of Weak Belief just doesn't seem to *do* very much.

To me (d) is especially telling. As Jennifer points out, we keep track of each other's attitudes largely to explain and predict one another's actions and to coordinate collective action. Given (d), only Strong Belief appears to be adequate to this purpose. Moreover, Jennifer also notes we base our judgments of what people believe on what we hear them say and see them do (there's little else to go on). Given (c) and (d) though, it seems like this evidence bears more directly on Strong Belief than on Weak Belief.

(The deeper reason why Weak Belief cannot serve as as a rational guide to action in Ben's framework is that the attitude is crowded out by *credence* on the action-guiding front: if one's credences *already* determine what it's rational to do, and they're prior to your Weak Beliefs, then there isn't any guidance left for Weak Belief to give. So to modify this aspect of the view, it seems we would need to downgrade the role of credence somehow.)

Weak Belief's disconnection to action is linked to the *voluntaristic* quality Ben attributes to Weak Belief formation: typically, when one is rationally in a position to form a Weak Belief by venturing an informed guess, it will also be rational to refrain from forming an opinion. To that extent, it's up to the believer what they reasonably believe. Presumably, if Weak Belief were a

guide to action, rationality could not afford to be so slapdash. In other words, the reason why you are free to pick your own Weak Beliefs is because it just *doesn't matter* what you weakly believe. While this broader insignificance explains Weak Belief's voluntaristic aspect, it simultaneously speaks against its being a joint-carving, basic psychological attitude.

This comes out starkly when Ben investigates the (im)permissibility of 'toggling' one's Weak Beliefs in this paper. While Ben judges such toggling to be impermissible, there don't seem to be any deeper reasons to avoid it: "If certain aspects of our psychological lives involve temporally-extended epistemic processes for which it's important that our full beliefs remain constant, it's not clear that there are any such processes for which it's important that our *weak beliefs* remain constant." (p. 15-6) So in the end Ben confesses that the prohibition against toggling weak belief may just be primitive (p. 16*n*). Again, it seems that this is linked to the fact that Weak Belief has no role in reasoning, decision making, or anywhere else in the cognitive economy. If Weak Belief doesn't matter, why not just toggle away?

In §4, Ben turns to an area where Weak Belief's voluntaristic aspect is an asset. As Ben explains, the fact that weak beliefs, like guesses, are to an extent voluntary and unforced makes them appropriate targets of moral scrutiny. This greatly helps to explain the moralised character of beliefs discussed in the moral encroachment literature, if we assume that the beliefs under scrutiny are in fact *Weak Beliefs*.

At the same time, Weak Belief's lack of consequence also raises problems for this application. In the John Hope Franklin example Ben discusses, part of what we blame the woman for are the things she *says* and *does* to Franklin. But given (c-d) what she says and does is not attributable to her Weak Beliefs. More generally, we seem to care (and sometimes care morally) about what people think of us because it affects how we will be treated. But Ben's account appears to imply that only Strong Beliefs have such effects, which seems to tell against the suggestion that Weak Beliefs are the objects of moral scrutiny.

Jennifer's child and AI acquisition data show that the concept of *belief* is acquired with great effort. Could it really be that we go through all that trouble just to latch onto a mental state that is epiphenomenal, a state which has hardly any bearing on how people act, think and speak?

Thinking is Basic, and Thinking is Weak

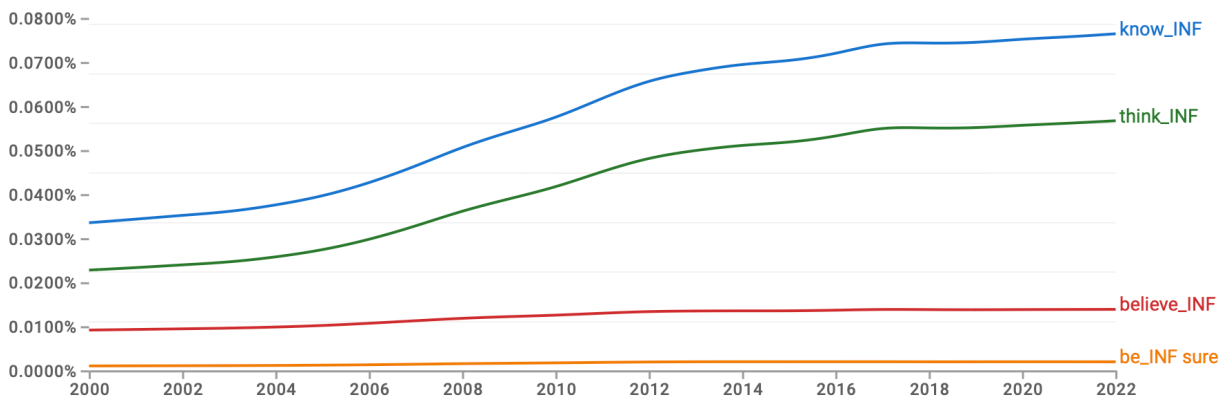
Jennifer agrees with Ben (at least for the sake of argument) that 'believe' and 'think' are mostly synonymous. If you want to grant belief a basic role in folk psychology, that is the way you have to go. Because if instead you pitted the concept of *belief* against the concept of *thinking that*, the linguistic evidence rails against the hypothesis that the former concept is more basic:

- ▶ The attitude verb "to think that" has direct, unproblematic translations in just about every natural language.
- ▶ By contrast, other languages do not have an attitude distinct from 'to think that' which maps neatly to the English 'belief'/'to believe that'.

- ▶ In German, for instance, the closest analogue would be *'der Glaube' / 'glauben'*. But while *'glauben'* pairs with *'believe'* in sentences like *'I believe you'*, it expresses a very weak doxastic attitude — something like *'suspect'* or *'suppose'*. *"Der Glaube,"* meanwhile, means something closer to *faith* or *conviction*.
- ▶ It's similarly tricky to find analogues of *'believe' / 'belief'* in other languages.
- ▶ E.g. I have great difficulty explaining my work on belief to my Dutch friends, just because there is no good substitute for *"belief"* in the language.
- ▶ Clearly it is implausible to suggest that *belief* is a fundamental folk-psychological concept that can be expressed exclusively by speakers of English.
- ▶ In terms of distribution: *"think"* is used far more frequently than *"believe,"* again suggesting that it expresses if anything the more basic folk psychological concept.
- ▶ Even within English, usage of *"belief"* and *"to believe"* is diffuse, and does not seem to neatly glum onto a single unambiguous concept:
 - ▶ In particular the notion of *"belief" / "to believe"* employed by philosophers and cognitive scientists does not seem to be the core usage of the word: students and non-philosophers frequently have trouble latching on to the intended concept.

However, if you then want to maintain that it is the *strong* notion of belief that plays this role, you are now stuck arguing that *thinking that* is the doxastic analogue of *knowing that*. And that seems like a tall order given the stiff competition *thinking* gets in this regard from *being sure*:

- ▶ *"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:



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"*.

- 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.
- ▶ In these examples, Jennifer's appeal to a special, interactive use of attitude reports does not get off the ground: they're third-person reports that describe Ashley and Jim's mental states without any view to settling the question in the present. You can put them all in the past tense or focus the attitude verb without changing the acceptability.

Conclusion: for the role of the doxastic analogue of knowledge, 'being sure' is a superior candidate to 'thinking' in numerous ways. But if there is another doxastic attitude that is more closely aligned with knowledge, then *thinking that* is **not** the doxastic analogue of *knowing that*. And if *believing* goes with *thinking*, that means believing isn't either.

So... Was *Thinking* A Mistake?

Summing up: Jennifer has persuaded me that Strong Belief is a much more joint-carving notion than Weak Belief: it has a far more central role to play, both psychologically and epistemically. But Ben persuaded me that the linguistic evidence proves that Weak Belief plays a central role in attitude ascriptions and folk psychology.

Could these things both be true? If they were both true, it would be a striking conceptual misfire on the part of humanity. Somehow, folk psychology bet on the wrong horse: in putting *thinking* at the centre, we picked the completely wrong concept! Somehow, people of all nations and creeds have coordinated on obsessing about an attitude that is in fact of no psychological consequence. Moreover, this happened in spite of the fact that there is a concept in the vicinity, viz. Strong Belief, that is more useful, simpler and better connected to other folk psychological concepts.

Is that really where we have to go? Surely not. For one thing, there isn't some magic, invisible barrier that stops us from talking about what other people *are sure of* instead of worrying about what they are *thinking*. So if the former topic really were that much more useful and informative, that's what people would talk about.

If *thinking* really is *weakly believing*, it seems to me that Weak Belief must be predictive and explanatory of behaviour in a way that Ben's account does not yet capture — else we wouldn't care so much about what people think. Perhaps thinking is further away from knowledge than philosophers thought. But at the same time, Jennifer is surely right that, like knowledge, belief must be a useful concept to a social animal: one that helps us to understand each other's behaviour and coordinate our actions.