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The myth of full belief

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Abstract

Belief is typically understood to be the success-neutral counterpart of knowledge. But there is no success-neutral counterpart of knowledge.

1 | KNOWLEDGE-LEVEL COMMITMENT

What ought we to believe and what does it take to believe are two of the central questions in epistemology and the philosophy of mind. But what kind of belief are we talking about when we ask these questions?

Philosophers often say that they mean *full* or *outright* belief; see Williamson (2000, forthcoming), Wedgwood (2012), Genin (2019), and references therein. This is meant to distinguish the kind of belief at issue from related attitudes, such as those that are more demanding (like absolute certainty), less demanding (like mere suspicion), or gradable (like Bayesian subjective probabilities).

The jargon *full* and *outright* indicates that these authors don't expect us to simply channel our understanding of the word *believe* in ordinary English. Maybe the ordinary notion and the intended quasi-technical notion are the same. But maybe not. These authors intend to sidestep this issue by inviting us to instead understand full(/outright) belief in terms of the distinctive role that it plays in our mental lives.

What then is the distinctive role of full belief? One answer which enjoys broad support is that full belief is the success-neutral counterpart of knowledge. This is the idea that I want to explore here.

More precisely, say that full belief is a *kind of knowledge-level commitment* just in case it satisfies the following three conditions:

- 1. Full belief is *necessary for knowledge*: one knows that *p* only if one fully believes that *p*.
- 2. Full belief is *subject to a knowledge norm*: one should fully believe only what one knows, and an agent who recognizes that they both fully believe that *p* and yet fail to know that *p* is in a defective state of mind.
- 3. Full belief is *doxastic*: what one fully believes depends on the same kind of factors as what one thinks and what one is sure of, and not on the more extrinsic factors that distinguish these

attitudes from knowledge. For example, one can fully believe propositions that are neither true nor supported by one's evidence.

Section 2 argues that, despite satisfying condition 3 (by definition), *thinking* fails to satisfy condition 2 and *being sure* fails to satisfy condition 1. Section 3 goes on to argue that no attitude jointly satisfies conditions 1, 2, and 3. Section 4 then offers a new externalist conception of memory belief as an attitude that satisfies analogues of 1 and 2 but not of 3.

2 | NEITHER THINKING NOR BEING SURE

This section summarizes a line of argument from Goodman and Holguín (2023) for the conclusion that neither thinking, nor being sure, nor any intermediate degree of confidence is a kind of knowledge-level commitment. This is because neither thinking nor any degree of confidence short of being sure is subject to a knowledge norm in the way that being sure is, and being sure is not necessary for knowing.

Let me first explain the point of condition 2, which says that there is a knowledge norm on full belief. Many belief-adjacent attitudes are necessary for knowledge. For example, having some non-zero credence in a proposition is plausibly a requirement for knowing that it is true. But merely having some non-zero credence in a proposition isn't enough to count as fully believing it, because it doesn't entail that one is sufficiently committed to the truth of that proposition. Capturing the idea of full belief therefore requires saying what counts as sufficient commitment to a proposition. Condition 2 does just that, using knowledge as a benchmark: one's commitment is sufficient for full belief when it becomes normatively incompatible with ignorance.

To sharpen the idea of an attitude being subject to a knowledge norm, consider the following contrast between being sure and thinking. Assertions like *I don't know whether it rained, but I'm sure that it did* sound terrible. By contrast, parallel admissions like *I don't know whether it rained, but I think that it did* are perfectly natural. The simplest account of this contrast is that, on the one hand, one shouldn't be sure of things that one doesn't know, whereas, on the other hand, there is no parallel norm connecting what one knows and what one merely thinks. (See Holguín (2022) for more on norms on thinking, with a focus on connections between what one thinks and one's subjective probabilities.)

Some epistemologists with more internalist leanings will deny that there is any important sense in which one ought to be sure of only what one knows. But it is still natural for them to explain the above contrast in terms of knowledge, just in a slightly more indirect way. Drawing on the second clause of condition 2, they can say that recognizing that one both fails to know whether p and yet is sure that p is problematic in a way that recognizing that one both fails to know whether p and yet thinks that p is not; compare Huemer (2007), Smithies (2012), and Rosenkranz (2021). More generally: there are various plausible ways of capturing the intuitive idea that full belief aims at knowledge, and the differences between them won't make much difference in what follows.

We have just seen that, on its intended interpretation, condition 2 entails that merely thinking that a proposition is true, in the ordinary sense of *think*, is an insufficiently committal attitude to be a candidate for full belief as it is usually conceived. The same goes for any level of confidence short of being sure: *I don't know whether it rained and I'm not sure whether it did, but I'm pretty confident that it did* sounds fine, for example. In this connection, Goodman and Holguín (2023) argue that being sure can be characterized as the degree of confidence at which a knowledge norm kicks in, where degrees of confidence are understood as in Goodman (2023b).

Being sure isn't a kind of knowledge-level commitment for a different reason: it isn't necessary for knowing. This is because continuing to remember that p is compatible with becoming unsure whether p. This point should be distinguished from the much more radical view of Radford (1966), who influentially claimed that continuing to know something by remembering it is compatible with having hardly any confidence that it is true and being sure that you have never learned it and are just randomly guessing. I am not claiming anything like that. To illustrate what I am claiming, consider the following case.

FORGOTTEN LEARNING

As a child Bill learned that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. Decades later he has long since forgotten learning this. However, he continues to think, and in fact remains pretty confident, that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. He is no longer sure that it is, but this isn't because he has any particular reason for doubt. It is just an ordinary case of being pretty confident yet not sure of something that he seems to remember.

It seems wrong to describe Bill as having forgotten that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. In fact, it seems right to describe him as continuing to remember that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. And given this fact, it seems right to describe him as continuing to know that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland, despite his not being sure. (Williamson, 2000 and Moon, 2013, among others, defend the claim that remembering entails knowing.)

This conclusion fits with our ordinary way of talking about cases like this. Suppose that Bill is asked whether he knows the capital of Maryland. He might naturally reply *I think so, but I'm not sure*. That is: he thinks that he *knows* what the capital is, despite recognizing that he isn't sure of what the capital is (or of whether the knows what the capital is). So natural ways of talking involve taking seriously the possibility of knowing without being sure.

3 | AGAINST FULL BELIEF

This section gives an argument that no attitude is a kind of knowledge-level commitment. Here is the abstract structure of the argument. We will consider a pair of cases. The cases are alike in the factors that determine their protagonist's doxastic attitudes. So the two cases cannot differ in whether the agent fully believes a given proposition p, by condition 3 of knowledge-level commitment. In the first case, the agent knows that p. So by condition 1 they must fully believe that p, and hence also fully believe that p the second case. However, in the second case the agent doesn't know that p. They would then have to be violating the knowledge norm on full belief, by condition 2 of knowledge-level commitment. But there is nothing normatively inappropriate about their state of mind. It follows that no attitude is a kind of knowledge-level commitment.

Here is the argument more concretely. Consider the following case:

FORGOTTEN EVIDENCE

As a child Bill's teacher told him that she was pretty confident that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. On this basis Bill reasonably became pretty confident himself that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland, without knowing or being sure that it is.

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Decades later he has long since forgotten the episode, but he remains pretty confident that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. His current state of mind is the same in all doxastic respects as it is in FORGOTTEN LEARNING.

I will now argue that FORGOTTEN LEARNING and FORGOTTEN EVIDENCE exhibit the abstract structure advertised above. By construction, Bill has the same doxastic attitudes in both cases. And as I argued in the previous section, in FORGOTTEN LEARNING Bill continues to know that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. What remains to be established is that, in FORGOTTEN EVIDENCE, Bill continues not to know that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland and that there continues to be nothing normatively inappropriate about this ignorance.

I think it is pretty clear that forgetting his basis for being pretty confident that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland cannot transform Bill's ignorance of that fact into knowledge. (If this is questioned, we can consider a variant of the case in which Annapolis isn't the capital of Maryland but Bill's teacher's testimony reasonably misleads him into being pretty confident that it is. Bill then clearly lacks knowledge, and the argument below retains its plausibility.) The more delicate question is whether forgetting his teacher's testimony makes Bill's continued confidence misplaced.

Why should it? We often retain our opinions despite forgetting our original bases for holding them. This is not problematic in general, since it is compatible with those opinions continuing to amount to knowledge, as we saw in the case of FORGOTTEN LEARNING. Nor, as I argued in the last section, is there any general normative requirement to be pretty confident only of propositions that one knows, provided one remains unsure, as Bill does in FORGOTTEN EVIDENCE. In fact, in this case it seems that Bill ought to be pretty confident Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. After all, he can tell that he is pretty confident that it is, and this fact about himself is pretty good evidence for him that it is, just as the fact that his teacher was pretty confident that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland was, years earlier, pretty good evidence that it is (at least given Bill's background knowledge, now and then, about his and his teacher's general reliability about such matters).

A proponent of full belief as a kind of knowledge-level commitment might object that this argument misses the mark. They might reply that there isn't anything wrong with Bill being pretty confident. The problem, according to them, is that he fully believes. In reply: this objection is unpersuasive because it simply assumes the presence of a doxastic attitude no evidence of which has yet been given. If there were something clearly wrong with Bill's doxastic state, that would be some such evidence. But we have not yet found anything amiss.

It is true that in FORGOTTEN EVIDENCE, unlike in FORGOTTEN LEARNING, Bill mistakenly thinks that he knows that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. Whether this indicates anything normatively amiss is far from clear, and why a normative defect in his thinking that he knows a proposition should imply a defect in his first-order doxastic attitudes towards that proposition is unclear too. Fortunately we can set these issues aside, since we can simply modify the case to one in which Bill suspends judgment on whether he is in a FORGOTTEN LEARNING-type case or in a FORGOTTEN EVIDENCE-type case. There clearly needn't by anything wrong with such agnosticism, and this modification of the example doesn't disrupt any of the preceding argument.

In sum, I see no good reason to think that there is anything normatively inappropriate about Bill's ignorance in FORGOTTEN EVIDENCE. If that is right, then there is nothing that answers to the conception of full belief as a kind of knowledge-level commitment.

Let me make a few comments about this argument before moving on.

First, although I don't want to undersell the interest of having a general argument of this form, its conclusion (that no attitude is a kind of knowledge-level commitment) is not very surprising in

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light of the conclusion of the previous section (that neither thinking nor being sure nor any degree of confidence is a kind of knowledge-level commitment). Once that earlier conclusion is accepted, it is quite unclear what doxastic attitudes remain as candidates for knowledge-level commitment, and why we should expect any such attitude to exist.

Goodman and Holguín (2023) argue that there is no reason to expect there to be any such attitude, on the grounds that the important theoretical roles relating doxastic attitudes to action are already taken by thinking and by being sure. For example, they argue that being sure is the norm on assertion, and that being unsure is the norm on inquiry. (The norms connecting thinking and action are more subtle.) In this connection, they suggest that most debates in contemporary epistemology framed in terms of 'full' or 'outright' belief can be profitably understood as concerned with the ordinary notion of being sure. Denying that any attitude is a kind of knowledge-level commitment needn't be expecially disruptive to ordinary epistemological theorizing.

Goodman and Salow (2023) amplify this point from a different angle. They argue that, in many cases of central interest to contemporary epistemologists, it is productive to theorize under the following idealization: (i) that agents' knowledge can be factored into their *evidence* and their *inductive* knowledge that goes beyond what that evidence logically entails, and (ii) that evidence is transparent, in the sense that one's evidence entails what one's evidence is. They then conjecture that unsure knowledge essentially involves violations of this idealization. In FORGOTTEN LEARNING, for example, a basic source of evidence, namely memory, yields knowledge without one's evidence entailing that this has happened. If this conjecture is right, then just as the non-transparency of evidence is often (though not always) reasonably ignored, so too are the ways in which being sure falls short of knowledge-level commitment.

Another notable feature of the argument of this section is that it sidesteps contested issues about the attitude expressed by *believe* in ordinary English – or attitudes (plural) if *believe* turns out to be ambiguous in some relevant way. For example, Hawthorne et al. (2016) influentially argued (against the prevailing orthodoxy) that in ordinary English *believe* is always synonymous with *think* in the kind of sentences that we have been considering. None of the above turns on whether they are correct. (And conversely: Hawthorne et al. are explicit that their argument leaves open whether there is such an attitude as full belief understood as a kind of knowledge-level commitment.)

I should reiterate that, although I deny that any attitude is a kind of knowledge-level commitment in the sense I have defined it here, I don't deny that some doxastic attitudes can be singled out in terms of their connections to knowledge. For example, being sure is the least degree of confidence subject to a knowledge norm, and perhaps some non-trivial degree of confidence can be singled out as the lowest one compatible with knowing.

In fact, there is a less demanding sense in which being sure might still be necessary for knowledge after all, despite cases of unsure knowing: perhaps, in order to know that p, one must be sure that p at some time past or present. Bill's unsure knowing in FORGOTTEN LEARNING does not threaten this principle, since he was sure that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland when he initially learned that it is.

This raises an intriguing possibility: could something like knowledge-level commitment be salvaged by looking beyond attitudes like thinking, being sure, and degrees of confidence and considering attitudes that depend more intimately on one's cognitive history, such as on whether one was ever sure to begin with? I will conclude by speculatively exploring one version of this idea.

4 MEMORY BELIEF

This section explores the idea that memory belief can be characterized as a kind of rememberinglevel commitment. Let me begin by explaining the notion of memory belief.

The orthodox view is that the verb *remember*, like *know* and unlike *think* and *be sure*, is factive: you can't remember what isn't so. In what follows I will assume that this orthodox view is correct. For example, if someone remembers that they paid their rent, then it follows that they did in fact pay their rent. By contrast, someone can think or be sure that they paid their rent even if in fact they did not pay their rent.

The factivity of remember has long frustrated philosophers writing about memory. These writers understandably want a word that subsumes both remembering and misremembering. Unfortunately, ordinary English seems not to furnish one: there is no non-factive verb that stands to remember as any of think, believe, or be sure stands to know. Sometimes we can get by talking about what one seems to remember. But not always, since memory errors are possible even in creatures who cannot, or at any rate do not, have any attitudes about whether they remember. For this reason (among others) the unlovely jargon memory belief is often used in the philosophy of memory to convey the supposed success-neutral counterpart of remembering.

In light of the arguments of the last two sections, one might expect that, under scrutiny, the notion of memory belief will fracture into distinct states of memory thinking and memory surety, only the first of which is necessary for remembering and only the second of which is subject to a remembering norm. But this is not inevitable.

Say that memory belief is a kind of remembering-level commitment just in case it satisfies the following three conditions:

- 4. Memory belief is *necessary for remembering*: one remembers that p only if one memory-believes that p.
- 5. Memory belief is *subject to a remembering norm*: one should memory-believe only what one remembers, and an agent who recognizes that they both memory-believe that p and yet fail to remember that *p* is in a defective state of mind.
- 6. Memory belief is *mnemonic*: what one memory-believes depends only on the factors that determine what doxastic attitudes one has and on how those attitudes have been maintained in memory over time, but not on the more external factors that distinguish such attitudes from remembering. For example, one can memory-believe propositions that are false.

The most significant difference between knowledge-level commitment and remembering-level commitment is in their third conditions. Both conditions serve the same purpose: 3 distinguishes full belief from knowledge, and 6 distinguishes memory belief from remembering. But condition 6 is easier to satisfy, since it allows that what one memory-believes can depend on factors in addition to the purely doxastic factors alluded to in condition 3. A person's cognitive history may make a difference to what they memory-believe, in ways that cannot affect what they count as thinking or being sure or confident of to any given degree.

This difference is best illustrated by Bill. Assume for the sake of argument that memory belief is a kind of remembering-level commitment. In FORGOTTEN LEARNING, Bill remembers that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland, and hence memory-believes that it is (by condition 4). In FORGOTTEN EVIDENCE, Bill does not remember that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland (since he never knew or remembered it to begin with), yet he is not thereby doing anything normatively inappropriate. So Bill must not have a memory belief that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland

(by condition 5). So despite being doxastically equivalent, the two cases cannot be mnemonically equivalent (by condition 6).

This shows that characterizing memory belief as a kind of remembering-level commitment requires accepting an unusually externalist conception of memory belief. What memory beliefs an agent has, and hence what they are normatively required to remember, depends not only on the agent's doxastic state, but also on that state's etiology. In FORGOTTEN LEARNING, Bill remains confident because his memory system has preserved, without too much attenuation, what was once a state of surety. In FORGOTTEN EVIDENCE, by contrast, Bill remains confident because his memory system has preserved, without any attenuation, a degree of confidence short of surety. This difference in etiology affects whether Bill's current confidence constitutes a memory belief: in the first case it does, but in the second case it doesn't.

We can sharpen this conception of memory belief by considering a third case:

FORGOTTEN MISINFORMATION

As a child Bill was told and on that basis became sure that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. Decades later he has long since forgotten being told this. However, he continues to think, and in fact remains pretty confident, that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. He is no longer sure that it is, but this isn't because he has any particular reason for doubt. It is just an ordinary case of being pretty confident yet not sure of something that he seems to remember. But unlike in the actual world, in this world Baltimore is the capital of Maryland.

By construction, FORGOTTEN LEARNING and FORGOTTEN MISINFORMATION are alike in the respects that, according to condition 6, determine what Bill memory-believes. So as in FORGOT-TEN LEARNING, Bill memory-believes that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland in FORGOTTEN MISINFORMATION. But this isn't something that he remembers, since remembering is factive and in this thought experiment Annapolis is not the capital of Maryland. So although Bill is no longer in violation of the knowledge norm on being sure, he remains in violation of the remembering norm on memory belief, and so remains in a normatively defective state of mind.

I think the conception of memory belief as remembering-level commitment is worthy of serious consideration, despite its surprising externalist implications. I want to close with an advertisment for a logically independent but related idea.

A central idea in the philosophy of memory is that memory preserves some kind of epistemic status. In Goodman (2023a) I defend a version of this idea: that persisting memory beliefs, unlike beliefs of other kinds, never go from knowledge to non-knowledge (or vice versa). If memory belief is also a kind of remembering-level commitment, as I have suggested here, then it preserves the normative requirement to remember, and hence to know as well. So perhaps memory belief in particular, rather than belief more generally, is the non-factive mental state most satisfyingly illuminated by its connection to knowledge.

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