

THE *AD HOMINEM* ARGUMENT AGAINST 'KNOWLEDGE IS TRUE BELIEF': A REPLY TO MARTENS

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ABSTRACT

In a recent article in this journal, David Martens (2010) criticized one of my arguments (in Aikin 2010) against the thesis (TB) that true belief is sufficient for knowledge. The argument in question was, roughly, that because believing TB yields errors in a subject's self-assessments of knowledge, we have evidence that TB is false. Martens argues that I failed to show either that TB yields such distortions or that such distortions are relevant to whether TB is true. Admittedly, my argument was cursory, but I don't see it as such a failure. Regardless, given Martens' criticisms, a more detailed version of the argument is called for. In what follows, I will briefly sketch what I take to be the current state of dialectical play with TB and then turn to another articulation of the ad hominem argument.

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1.

Crispin Sartwell's (1991, 1992) case for TB was my primary focus. Sartwell's argument comes in two phases. The first is the argument from what I call *Sartwell cases*, examples of subjects where they seem within their rights to claim they know but do not have justification. All the subjects have are true beliefs. Sartwell is modest about what his cases show, as he notes that these have only demonstrated that "justification is not a necessary condition", and that more needs to be provided to demonstrate that true belief is sufficient (Sartwell 1991, 60).

Sartwell's second argument is a dilemma, which is that justification is either instrumentally valuable (in being a means for true belief) or it is categorically required (as a cognitive duty). If the former, justification is not *part* of knowledge, but a *criterion* or *tool for achieving* it. If the latter, then justification and truth may conflict as ends, which makes knowledge "an incoherent notion" (Sartwell 1992, 180).

I argued that Sartwell cases are not counter-examples to the requirement of justification for knowledge, but rather are exemplary of the pragmatics of

concessive knowledge-attribution (Aikin 2010, 9). Further, I argued that the second horn of Sartwell's dilemma is not sharp, as the fact that justification and truth may conflict is not evidence of incoherence, but is simply a fact of fallibilism (Aikin 2011, 10).

And so the positive case *for* TB does not stand up. A further positive case *against* TB is possible. The front edge of such an argument is one from examples, particularly ones I call *terrible reasons cases*. Consider:

Marlo is a racist, and so as a matter of habit believes the worst of black people – most often, that they are criminals. Marlo sees Ken. Ken is black. She believes that (*k*) Ken is a criminal. Ken, it turns out, *is* a criminal – he steals bubble gum from the store.

On TB, Marlo knows that *k*. That seems counter-intuitive, because Marlo got the belief in a way that is contrary to the requirements of reason. Knowledge shouldn't be like that. Perhaps defenders of TB would be willing to bite the bullet with Marlo. But it can be less pleasant to do so with another case, consider such a case gettierized:

Margo, another racist, is in an elevator with Matt (who is black) and Barbara (who is not). Margo believes (*m*) she is in an elevator with a criminal. Matt is not a criminal; however, Barbara is – she steals bubble gum.

On TB, Margo would know *m*. But Margo arrived at *m* by terrible reasons, and it is not true of Matt, but of Barbara. TB-bullet-biters beware: this one will send you to the dentist.

2.

The dialectical situation for TB is not very good. In fact, it is bad. To close my previous essay, I added a further consideration against TB, namely, that believing it makes a person worse at knowledge assessment. It is to this argument that Martens' essay is a response, and as a matter of issue-clarity, it is important to note that even if Martens' criticisms of my *ad hominem* argument are right, that does not change the broader situation for TB.

To be clear, I acknowledge that the case is an *ad hominem* argument against TB, as it is about what happens to *people* when they believe TB – namely, that they get worse at assessing their own and others' knowledge. Consider the following case:

Marlon is a great lover of the football squad, the Rovers. Marlon believes (*r*) the Rovers will win the cup this year. Marlon is also convinced of TB, and so he attributes knowledge that *r* not only to himself but to all the other Rover fans confident in *r*.

Now, Marlon self-attributes knowledge that *r* because he holds that *r* is true and he sees himself as one assenting to it. So he knows it (at least he holds he knows it, by transmission). He sees others assenting to or asserting that *r*, and so attributes knowledge to them on that basis of that. The series of thoughts, particularly the knowledge-attributions, are in error. TB is to blame, or more particularly, Marlon's belief that TB is true is to blame.

Let us take a moment for a bit of comparing. Had Marlon believed, instead of TB, JTB (that knowledge is justified true belief), he would have performed this knowledge-assessment task better. He likely would have viewed his belief as mostly enthusiasm, and the same with his mates. And so he would have demurred at knowledge-attribution. JTB is false about knowledge, but at least those who believe it outperform those who believe TB.

Martens protests that moves such as these are illicit, as he holds that the following propositions are "questionable":

P1: If a conception of knowledge is true, then believing that conception does not make that person epistemically vicious, and

P1': If a conception of knowledge is true, then believing that conception does not make a person more epistemically vicious than she otherwise would be. (Martens 2010, 15 and 19)

Martens provides a few counter-examples to thoughts that might support P1 or P1'. One is a counter-example to a very general thought:

Why think P1 is true? ... (a) Because no truth is such that believing it could make a person worse? But common sense recognizes there is dangerous knowledge. Consider, for example, an ex-con recovering drug addict who would relapse into a life of crime were he to become aware of the heroin hidden in the room by a previous resident. (Martens 2010, 16)

The *ad hominem* argument isn't about *all truths*, but about truths regarding our concepts. Martens case gets more focused with the next counter-example:

(b) Because no true conceptual analysis is such that it could make a person a worse person? But perhaps true conceptual analysis are somehow dangerous to think (as the sun is dangerous to view directly)... (Martens 2010, 16)

Perhaps and somehow, but who has the burden of proof here? It certainly seems right that, to take Martens' Socratic imagery seriously, the clarification of our concepts is crucial to the development of virtues and effective action. That was why Socrates confronts, for example, Nicias and Laches about their definitions of bravery – they are military leaders, and they should know what bravery is. But their

accounts fail, and that explains why they are poor leaders (assuming they are the same Nicias and Laches of the ill-fated Sicilian expedition). That's not evidence that they need different *false* conceptions, but *true* ones. Martens then challenges even this thought that the pursuit of those definitions is worthwhile:

(c) Because no true analysis of the concept of knowledge is such that believing it could impair a person's ability to fulfill her epistemic obligations? But perhaps cultivating genuine epistemic virtues requires doing empirical science and perhaps doing epistemology is somehow inimical to doing empirical science. (Martens 2010, 17)

The problem, though, is that there is a difference between *having* a true analysis of knowledge and *doing* epistemology. You can have the former without doing the latter, and you can (most certainly) have the latter and not have the former. *Perhaps* doing epistemology *somehow* is inimical to developing virtues. Perhaps. But that's not the issue. The question is whether having an epistemological view or other is inimical to epistemic virtues. Martens then provides a counter-example to the thought that the proliferation of epistemologically unwarranted beliefs from an epistemic principle is evidence that the principle is false.

Suppose, for example, [a subject] pathologically believes ... that spies have tapped her telephone and spies always seek to kill anyone whose telephone they tap. Suppose this person is psychologically constituted in such a way that, for ... universal instantiation and *modus ponens* ... she will reason in accordance with that conception just in case she believes it; and suppose she does believe that conception ... ([S]he will believe inferentially that spies are seeking to kill her.) Believing a true conception of logically correct inference thus makes her more epistemically vicious than she otherwise would be. (Martens 2010, 19)

And so Martens' case is that simply because TB may yield false knowledge-attributions when believed by someone, that needn't be evidence that TB is false, as *modus ponens* can yield false knowledge assessments, too, and that's not evidence against *modus ponens*.

What is necessary here is distinguishing *contributing* and non-contributing elements in these examples. Consider two cases:

Barry believes (with justification) that (*s*) if Sam is a bachelor, Sam is male, and (*t*) Sam is not a bachelor. Barry also believes that negating the antecedent is a valid inference form. So Barry believes (*u*) Sam is not a bachelor, on the basis of *s* and *t*.

Jamie needs to get to grandma's house, but it is snowing. Jake, her roommate, just arrived home and he tells her that the roads are fine. Jake is lying, because he wants Jamie out of the house. Jamie, though, believes

Jake. This is because she also holds that she should trust the testimony of those who've had the relevant experiences. The roads, as it turns out, are very icy, and Jamie ends up in the ditch.

In both Barry and Jamie cases, the believers have output that does not count as knowledge. Both subjects reason impeccably, according to their principles. So what explains why they have the errors? Now, Barry's beliefs *s* and *t* do occasion his belief that *u*, but the *contributing factor* for the error is Barry's incorrect belief that denying the antecedent is valid. In Jamie's case, the contributing factor for her error is that Jake lied to her. Her epistemic principle was just fine. So it is true that not all cases of error are cases where a subject has a false epistemic principle. In that, Martens is right. But in cases where the other inputs are not erroneous and the output is in error, then we have evidence that the principle is the contributing factor.

Let us return to the case of **Marlon**. Marlon's inputs are that he believes that *r* and that his friends believe that *r*. These inputs are not in question, but it seems clear that he's made an error in attributing knowledge that *r* to himself and others. So the contributing factor to the error is the epistemic principle, TB.

Martens' paranoid telephone user case has epistemically incorrect output (that spies will try to kill her), but the contributing factor there is her paranoid beliefs, not her commitment to universal instantiation and *modus ponens*. The thought with Barry, though, is that his contributing factor is not the input beliefs, but the principle he uses. Marlon is in the same boat. The lesson is that when people have bad input for their epistemic judgments, good epistemic principles guiding those judgments aren't going to help. But when people have good input but bad output, it's the principles that are to blame, and we see it in spades with Marlon and Barry. So the thought is that if an epistemic principle is the contributing factor for a pattern of epistemic error, then we have evidence that the principle is false.

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