

# *KNOWLEDGE, TRUE BELIEF, AND VIRTUOUS FALLIBILISM*

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## ABSTRACT

I rebut a complex *ad hominem* argument against the thesis that true belief is sufficient for knowledge. According to the argument, the insufficiency of true belief for knowledge is guaranteed by our epistemic obligation not to think of ourselves as infallible. My rebuttal seeks clarity about the precise content of that obligation and emphasizes the variety of ways in which that thesis can be affirmed. Though I do not offer any positive argument for the sufficiency of true belief for knowledge, I think the thesis is creditable for being consistent with truths about our epistemic obligations.

**Keywords:** belief, knowledge, epistemic obligation, epistemic virtue, fallibilism

## 1. Introduction

I will rebut an *ad hominem* argument against the thesis (TB) that true belief is sufficient for knowledge. According to the argument, which combines both circumstantial and abusive elements, the insufficiency of true belief for knowledge is guaranteed by the alleged fact (OF) that we have an epistemic obligation not to think of ourselves as infallible, or, equivalently by my stipulation, that thinking of ourselves as infallible makes us epistemically vicious. My rebuttal will seek clarity about the precise content of the obligation alleged by OF and will emphasize the variety of ways in which TB can be affirmed. I will maintain that we have not yet been given good reasons to accept the premises of the argument at issue against TB. Though I will not offer any positive argument for the sufficiency of true belief for knowledge, I think the thesis is creditable for being consistent with truths about our epistemic obligations.

## 2. Three *ad hominem* arguments

The argument at issue combines elements of, first, a *circumstantial* *ad hominem* argument offered against TB by William

Lycan (1994) and, second, an *abusive* ad hominem argument that is distinct from Lycan's argument. The argument at issue thus might well be called a *complex* ad hominem argument against TB. I will first sketch the other two arguments and then the complex ad hominem.

Lycan's argument is by reductio: suppose TB is true; but a contradiction follows from that assumption and some other premises; so, TB is not true. Now, Lycan's argument is a circumstantial ad hominem because its premises concern the circumstances of someone who believes TB. Though Lycan indulges in some playful rhetoric about the "arrogance" of someone who believes TB, his argument does not rest essentially on any purported lack of virtue in such a person. Nevertheless, as I argued elsewhere (Martens 2006), Lycan's argument equivocates about the notion of a person's being confident of a proposition, with the upshot that either Lycan's premises are already inconsistent even without the assumption that TB is true, or Lycan's inferences are not all valid. But some interesting elements of Lycan's argument may survive my critique. For example, on at least some resolutions of the equivocation, a Lycanian derivation seems to show (BK) that, if someone believes TB, then anything she believes, she believes she knows.

On the other hand, the abusive ad hominem argument that elsewhere I named "the pseudo-Lycan argument" (Martens 2006, 160, n. 34) looks like a blatant non sequitur from an unpleasant, irrelevant, and unlikely premise: anyone who believes TB is a bad person, so TB is not true. Now, unlike Lycan's argument, the pseudo-Lycan argument does rest essentially on a purported lack of virtue in a person who believes TB. Indeed, one anonymous reviewer (of a version of Martens 2006) suggested that the pseudo-Lycan argument is unworthy of serious critical discussion, calling the argument "dialectically criminal". But perhaps calling an argument "criminal" is no better than calling the person who makes it "bad".

Finally, the nub of the complex ad hominem argument that I will now describe and rebut is sketched by Scott Aikin with the following words.

Holding TB commits subjects to an attitude of infallibility with regard to their beliefs. [But] we are and ought to be epistemically modest[...] It is a reasonable presumption behind epistemology that getting clearer about the concept of knowledge would make us less epistemically vicious. Certainly, if we have the right conception of knowledge, we shouldn't be made by that conception *more vicious*. [...] TB is a conception of knowledge, and believing it [...] makes us epistemically vicious. [...] TB, then, cannot be true of knowledge. (Aikin 2010, 10, 12)

Aikin's argument combines elements of the other two and is essentially a *modus tollens*.

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

P2 TB is a conception of knowledge and believing it makes a person epistemically vicious.

C So, TB is not true. (From P1 and P2.)

Like the pseudo-Lycan argument, Aikin's rests essentially on a purported lack of virtue in a person who believes TB. Indeed, Aikin's argument can be thought of as a variant of the pseudo-Lycan, strengthened now by a valid form and a possibly relevant accusation. And, like Lycan's argument, Aikin's draws its conclusion from premises about the circumstances of someone who believes TB. (Those circumstances are scrutinized by means of OF and BK, both of which are essential to the subsidiary defence of P2, to be constructed below.) Indeed, besides intending to show that TB is not true, Aikin intends his argument to rescue Lycan's circumstantial ad hominem from my critique. But I do not think Aikin gives good reasons to accept the premises of his argument.

### 3. Dangerous knowledge

In the first place, I do not think Aikin gives good reasons to accept P1.

In defence of P1, Aikin says only, without further argument, that P1 is "a reasonable presumption behind epistemology". Now, it may seem odd to suppose that conceptions of knowledge ought to be firmly constrained by conceptions of epistemology, rather than the other way around. Be that as it may, conceptions of one sort are no less contested than conceptions of the other sort, and it is hard to see how appeal to one person's conception of epistemology might provide especially firm leverage against another person's conception of knowledge. Granted, some epistemologists may well presume, perhaps tacitly, that P1 is true. For example, if you think the achievable aim of epistemology is to cultivate epistemic virtue, and you think achieving that aim requires believing a true conception of knowledge, then P1 does seem reasonable in some sense for you to presume, on pain of inconsistency. But if you think of epistemology in some other way, then P1 may not seem reasonable for you to presume. For example, you may think that cultivating epistemic virtue is no part of epistemology's aim or that it is an unachievable aim. And a robust general defense of P1 is not obvious.

How might a general defense of P1 go? Why think P1 is true? Options that readily come to mind are not promising. (a) Because no truth is such that believing it could make a person a worse person? But common sense recognizes that there is dangerous knowledge. Consider, for example, an ex-con recovering drug addict who would relapse into a life of crime if he were to become aware of the heroin hidden in the room by a previous resident. (b) Because no true conceptual analysis is such that believing it could make a person a worse person? But perhaps true conceptual analyses are somehow dangerous to think (as the sun is dangerous to view directly) and perhaps cultivating moral and epistemic virtue requires that we stop short of

knowing such truths (as seeing the world upon leaving the cave requires that we stop short of viewing the sun directly). (c) Because no true analysis of the concept of knowledge is such that believing it could impair a person's ability to fulfil her epistemic obligations? But perhaps cultivating genuine epistemic virtue requires doing empirical science and perhaps doing epistemology is somehow inimical to doing empirical science. (Louis Armstrong reportedly replied, "Not enough to hurt my playing", when asked whether he read music.)

Granted, an epistemologist can in some sense reasonably presume that P1 is true. But it does not follow that it cannot be reasonable for another epistemologist not to presume that P1 is true. So, I do not think P1 provides an especially firm basis for an argument against TB.

#### 4. Obligatory modesty

I also do not think Aikin gives good reasons to think P2 is true. And I do not think P2 provides an especially firm basis for an argument against TB.

In defence of P2, Aikin offers only terse remarks. But a subsidiary defence of P2 as resting on OF and BK can be constructed to be consistent those remarks, as follows.

- P3 TB is a conception of knowledge. (Analytic.)
- P4 An epistemically vicious person is one who believes something she ought not to believe. (Analytic, given my stipulation above.)
- P5 Each person has something she believes but ought not to believe she knows. (This is OF. "[W]e are and ought to be epistemically modest.")
- P6 If someone believes TB, then anything she believes, she believes she knows. (This is BK, from Lycan's argument. Aikin [p. 12] relies on "the first step in [Lycan's] reductio".)
- P2a So, if someone believes TB, then there is something she believes she knows that she ought not to believe she knows. (From P5 and P6.)
- P2b So, if someone believes TB, then there is something she believes that she ought not to believe. (From P2a.)
- P2c So, if someone believes TB, then she is an epistemically vicious person. (From P2b and P4.)
- P2 So, TB is a conception of knowledge and believing it makes a person epistemically vicious. (From P2c and P3.)

I think P5, with the existence claim in its left conjunct, should not be seen as a fundamental principle of epistemic obligation (or, equivalently given the present stipulation, of epistemic virtue). Presumably the obligation asserted in the right conjunct is due to (supervenies on) some characteristic of the belief whose existence is asserted in the left conjunct. P5 thus should be seen as deriving from more fundamental principles, as follows.

P5a Each person has something she believes, where her belief of that thing has characteristic X. (This existence claim might be common sense, depending on what characteristic X is.)

P5b If someone has something she believes, where her belief of that thing has characteristic X, then she ought not to believe she knows that thing. (Presumably this supervenience principle for epistemic obligation is a priori.)

P5 So, each person has something she believes but ought not to believe she knows. (This is OF; from P5a and P5b.)

Explicit construction of a defence of P2 thus requires quite complex argumentation, and critical scrutiny of this defence requires still further construction. To begin with, characteristic X remains unspecified. I will consider some likely specifications of the supervenience base of our obligation not to think of ourselves as infallible. I will argue that the defence of P2 fails on each specification. Though it will remain open that perhaps the defence of P2 succeeds on some other specification, my argument will be illustrative of the range of resources available to advocates of TB who may seek to breach such defences.

## 5. Impermissible belief and forbidden knowledge

Let a belief with characteristic X be a belief one ought not to have (that is, a belief the having of which makes its thinker epistemically vicious). Then P5a is plausible, though it is not easy to say why P5b would be accepted by someone who does not already think that permissibility of belief is a necessary condition for knowledge. Be that as it may, grant both P5a and P5b on this interpretation. Then P2 does not follow from P2c and P3, for P2b follows directly from P5b and both P2b and P2c are vacuously true on this interpretation of characteristic X. Every person is already epistemically vicious, whether or not she believes TB. So, it does not follow that believing TB makes a person epistemically vicious. So, the defence of P2 fails.

Aikin protests (p. 12) that at least believing TB makes a person more epistemically vicious than she otherwise would be, for, where she otherwise would only have an initial impermissible belief of something, she now also impermissibly believes she knows that thing.

- 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.
- P2' TB is a conception of knowledge and believing it makes a person more epistemically vicious than she otherwise would be.
- C So, TB is not true. (From P1' and P2'.)

But this protest is ineffective, for P1' is questionable. By analogy with P1' we might think believing a true conception of logically correct inference cannot make a person more epistemically vicious than she otherwise would be. But we would be mistaken. Suppose a person has many impermissible non-inferential beliefs, and thus is epistemically vicious. (Suppose, for example, she pathologically believes, non-inferentially, that spies have tapped her telephone and that spies always seek to kill anyone whose telephone they tap.) Suppose this person is psychologically constituted in such a way that, for a certain true conception of logically correct inference (say, 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. This person will believe the conclusions she draws from her impermissible non-inferential beliefs, and her conclusion beliefs (which she otherwise would not have) will also be impermissible, despite being drawn with logical correctness. (For example, she 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.

## **6. Permissible belief and obligatory fallibilism**

### **6.1 Hidden belief and hesitant belief**

Now let a belief with characteristic X be a permissible belief with characteristic Y. I will consider two likely specifications of characteristic Y, that is, specifications on which P5a is plausible and P5b is at least not implausible. (Letting a belief with characteristic Y be a false belief thus is not a likely specification in this sense, for it can be the case that, for some false proposition, one may permissibly believe one knows that proposition, say, by testimony.) I will argue that the defence of P2 fails on both specifications of characteristic Y.

For the first specification of characteristic Y, let a belief with characteristic Y be a belief that is at least somewhat hidden from its thinker, that is, a belief of which its thinker is not well aware. Then a belief with characteristic X is a permissible belief of which its thinker is not well aware. On this interpretation P5a is plausible, though it is not easy to say why P5b would be accepted by someone who does not already think that full awareness of belief is a necessary condition for knowledge. Be that as it may, grant both P5a and P5b on this interpretation.

Now, while P5 (OF) does follow from P5a and P5b on this interpretation, so does P5.1.

P5.1 Each person has something she believes, where she is not well aware of her belief of that thing, but which she ought not to believe she knows.

And, what has not made explicit previously here, but which Aikin's own account acknowledges, the Lycanian derivation of P6 (BK) assumes full awareness of belief. That is, P6 has all along been intended more precisely as P6.1.

P6.1 If someone believes TB, then anything she believes and is well aware of believing, she believes she knows.

But P2a does not follow, either from P5.1 and P6.1, or from P5 and P6.1. So, the defence of P2 fails on the first specification of characteristic Y.

For the second specification, let a belief with characteristic Y be a belief that is hesitant, and of which its thinker is well aware. Then a belief with characteristic X is a permissible belief that is hesitant, and of which its thinker is well aware. On this interpretation P5a seems plausible, though it is not easy to say why P5b would be accepted by someone who does not already think knowledge requires belief that is strong (that is, not hesitant). Be that as it may, grant both P5a and P5b on this interpretation.

Now, the phenomena we are talking about when we speak of "belief that is hesitant" can be explained in various ways, depending on whether we hold belief to be all or nothing or a matter of degree. And, as I will now show, there are accommodating ways to affirm TB, whether belief is held to be all or nothing, or held to be a matter of degree. So, the defence of P2 fails on the second specification of characteristic Y too.

## 6.2 Knowledge and all-or-nothing belief

Suppose we hold belief to be all or nothing. Then it seems best to say that, when we speak of "a belief that is hesitant", we are not talking about a genuine belief, but rather are talking about a distinct though related sort of psychological state or occurrence that (speaking somewhat more technically) we can call "a mere tendency to believe". From this point of view, when we speak of "a belief that is strong (not hesitant)", we are talking about a genuine belief in such a way as to make it clear that we are not talking about a mere tendency to believe. Now, for P5 (OF) to follow from P5a and P5b on this interpretation, where the latter are both plausible, P5 must be understood more precisely as P5.2, and P5a and P5b must be understood more precisely as P5a2 and P5b2.

P5a2 Each person has something she merely tends (permissibly) to believe, where she is well aware of her mere tendency to believe that thing.

P5b2 If someone has something she merely tends to believe, where she is well aware of her mere tendency to believe that thing, then she ought not to believe she knows that thing.

P5.2 So, each person has something she merely tends to believe, where she is well aware of her mere tendency to believe that thing, but which she ought not to believe she knows. (From P5a2 and P5b2.)

And, for P2a to follow from P5.2 and P6 (BK), the latter must be understood more precisely as P6.2.

P6.2 If someone believes TB, then anything she merely tends to believe and is well aware of merely tending to believe, she believes she knows.

But P6.2 is not supported by any Lycanian derivation and is anyways implausible. So, the defence of P2 fails on this interpretation.

### **6.3 Knowledge and strong belief**

Suppose on the other hand that we hold belief to be a matter of degree. Then it seems right to say that, at least sometimes when we speak of “a belief that is hesitant”, we are talking, not about a mere tendency to believe, but about a genuine belief of a low degree. From this point of view, when we speak of “a belief that is strong (not hesitant)”, we are talking about a belief of a high degree. Now, from this point of view TB can be affirmed in two different ways, depending on whether or not knowledge is held to require strong belief (Martens 2006, 153–5).

Suppose, on the one hand, that we affirm TB together with the claim that knowledge requires strong belief (call this *restricted degreed TB*). For P5 (OF) to follow from P5a and P5b on this interpretation, where the latter are both plausible, P5 must be understood more precisely as P5.3, and P5a and P5b must be understood more precisely as P5a3 and P5b3.

P5a3 Each person has something she (permissibly) believes to a low degree, where she is well aware of her low degree of belief of that thing.

P5b3 If someone has something she believes to a low degree, where she is well aware of her low degree of belief of that thing, then she ought not to believe she knows that thing.

P5.3 So, each person has something she believes to some degree or other, where she is well aware of believing that thing to some degree or other, but which she ought not to believe she knows. (From P5a3 and P5b3.)

Now, taking “TB” to abbreviate “restricted degreed TB” in P2a and subsequent



inferences in the defence of P2, does P2a follow from P5.3 and P6.1 (BK), where the latter is supported by a Lycanian derivation? Well, the original Lycanian derivation of 6.1 presupposes that belief is all or nothing. If the Lycanian derivation is modified to reflect the present presupposition that belief is a matter of degree, then that derivation supports the following modification of 6.1.

P6.1a If someone believes restricted degreed TB, then anything she believes strongly and is well aware of believing strongly, she believes she knows.

But P2a does not follow from P5.3 and P6.1a. Granted, P2a does follow from P5.3 and P6.1b.

P6.1b If someone believes restricted degreed TB, then anything she believes to some degree or other and is well aware of believing to some degree or other, she believes she knows.

But P6.1b is not supported by any Lycanian derivation and is anyways implausible. So, the defence of P2 fails on this interpretation.

#### 6.4 True belief and degrees of knowledge

Suppose, on the other hand, that we affirm TB but reject the claim that knowledge requires strong belief (call this *unrestricted degreed TB*). From this point of view, it makes sense to speak (albeit in a somewhat technical way) of “hesitant knowledge” and “strong knowledge”, quite as much as it makes sense to speak (commonsensically) of “hesitant belief” and “strong belief”. That is, knowledge too is a matter of degree. For P5 (OF) to follow from P5a and P5b on this interpretation, where the latter are both plausible, P5 must be understood more precisely as P5.4, and P5a and P5b must be understood more precisely as P5a3 and P5b4.

P5a3 Each person has something she (permissibly) believes to a low degree, where she is well aware of her low degree of belief of that thing.

P5b4 If someone has something she believes to a low degree, where she is well aware of her low degree of belief of that thing, then she ought not to believe she knows that thing to a high degree.

P5.4 So, each person has something she believes to some degree or other, where she is well aware of believing that thing to some degree or other, but which she ought not to believe she knows strongly. (From P5a3 and P5b4.)

And, for P2a to follow from P5.4 and P6.1 (BK), the latter must be understood more precisely as P6.1c.

P6.1c If someone believes unrestricted degreed TB, then anything she

believes to some degree or other and is well aware of believing to some degree or other, she believes she knows strongly.

But P6.1c is not supported by any Lycanian derivation and is anyways implausible. Granted, P6.1d and P6.1e are supported by Lycanian derivations.

P6.1d If someone believes unrestricted degreed TB, then anything she believes strongly and is well aware of believing strongly, she believes she knows strongly.

P6.1e If someone believes unrestricted degreed TB, then anything she believes to some degree or other and is well aware of believing to some degree or other, she believes she knows to some degree or other.

But P2a (where “TB” now abbreviates “unrestricted degreed TB”) does not follow from P5.4 and either P6.1d or P6.1e. So, the defence of P2 fails on this interpretation too.

## **7. Conclusion**

As I said, I do not think Aikin gives good reasons to accept either premise of his complex ad hominem argument against TB. And, as illustrated (non-exhaustively) by my argument here, a range of resources are available to advocates of TB who seek to maintain their footing on the contested ground where the issues raised by those premises likely must be settled.

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