



Presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2017
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
June 20 to 22, 2017

Modifying the entailment thesis: Knowledge entails belief or acceptance

Adrienne Tan¹ and Mark Anthony Dacela²

¹ Undergraduate student, Philosophy Department, DLSU

² Undergraduate thesis coordinator, Philosophy Department, DLSU

*Adrienne Tan: aideehd@gmail.com

*Mark Anthony Dacela: mark.anthony.dacela@dlsu.edu.ph

Abstract: Epistemology attempts to establish the nature of knowledge. Its orthodox view, holds that a subject knows a proposition if he or she has epistemically justified, true belief. Some disputes focus on this belief requirement in what is known as the entailment thesis. But much of philosophical literature has taken the propositional attitudes of belief and acceptance as one and the same, often interchanging them as tacit. To believe in a proposition is to have a disposition to feel as though it were true. To accept a proposition is to adopt a policy of positing a proposition in a context for reasoning. In light of this, this paper aims to engage in a recent call for discourse on the entailment thesis. I will argue for the claim that the entailment thesis is insufficient to account for all cases of knowledge. Given the distinction between belief and acceptance, both are relevant to knowledge; thus providing a modification to the entailment thesis. I will first present the distinction between the two attitudes by enumerating debates along the history of the dispute. Next, I will present a case in experimental epistemology and discuss the study conducted by Myers-Schulz and Schwitzgebel and its opposition. Next, I will enumerate concise criteria for each attitude to distinguish their similarities and differences. I will thus resolve the gap between the previous studies by concluding that either acceptance or belief is relevant in knowledge attributions. This critique and assessment of knowledge in relation to belief formation and mental processes has implications on pressing issues across various communities and institutions.

Key Words: epistemology; belief; acceptance; knowledge; experimental philosophy

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *The entailment thesis*

In epistemology, the study of knowledge, philosophers have attempted to establish the nature of knowledge and the extent of that knowledge.

Central to the establishment of the nature of knowledge are discussions on its necessary and sufficient conditions. The orthodox view of knowledge holds that a subject s knows a proposition p , if and only if p is true, s believes p , and s is justified in believing p . This is also called the entailment thesis. Most disputes against this orthodox view of



Presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2017
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
June 20 to 22, 2017

knowledge have focused on the justification requirement. The belief requirement, on the other hand, has been less controversial because it seems intuitive that a subject that knows p also believes in p . A subject somewhat has a confidence, conviction, or even commitment to the truth of the proposition that is being ascribed knowledge. Therefore, it has been regarded as common sense that belief either precedes or is part and parcel to knowledge.

1.2 History of the disparity

Opponents of the entailment thesis, particularly critics of its belief requirement, argue that belief is not necessary for knowledge. They hold that it is possible for subjects to know without believing. The disparity may be due to the blurred definition of belief and some propositional attitudes it tends to be thrown in the mix with. This confusion can be seen in various areas of discourse, in everyday language as well as in theorizing in science. There is more to the distinction between what is often considered belief and other attitudes that are closely intertwined with it or mistaken for it. Specifically, belief is often meshed with acceptance. Their varying conditions have been treated indistinguishably in much of recent philosophical literature. The history of the distinction is rooted in various works in philosophy in the 1980s. The contrast, however, was made rather implicitly and ambiguously since it was often merely tackled in passing for the postulation of other theories or studies. It was nearly a decade later until Jonathan Cohen was the first to make clear-cut distinctions and a comparative analysis entirely dedicated to the matter.

2. A CASE STUDY

2.1 Developments in experimental epistemology

Recent debates have reignited interest in the criteria of knowledge, specifically the belief requirement. One of which was a 2013 study conducted by Blake Myers-Schulz and Eric Schwitzgebel who criticized proponents of the entailment thesis that continue to assert that no convincing counter examples have been made against it, hence it stands. In a survey conducted among the intuitions of university students, they presented five plausible cases of knowledge without belief. of which is the case of the unconfident examinee. Their results served as empirical data against the entailment

thesis.

2.2 The unconfident examinee

“Kate spent many hours studying for her history exam. She’s now in class taking the exam. Everything’s going quite well, until she comes to the final question. It reads, “What year did Queen Elizabeth die?” Kate had reviewed this date many times. She had even recited the date to a friend just a few hours earlier. So, when Kate sees that this is the last question, she feels relieved. She confidently looks down at the blank space, waiting to recollect the answer. But before she can remember it, the teacher interrupts and announces, “Alright, the class session is almost over. You have one more minute to finalize your answers.” Kate’s demeanor suddenly changes. She glances up at the clock, now flustered and worried. “Oh, no. I can’t perform well under this kind of pressure.” Her grip tightens around her pencil. She strains to recall the answer, but nothing comes to her. She quickly loses confidence. “I suppose I’ll just have to guess the answer,” she says to herself. With a sigh of disappointment, she decides to write “1603” into the blank space. This was, in fact, the correct answer.”

This case was determined by participants it was presented to as an example of knowledge without belief.

2.3 The opposing view

Shortly after, David Rose and Jonathan Shaffer redid a modified version of the Myers-Schulz and Schwitzgebel study to reverse the results entirely in favor of their claim. They claimed that the case of the unconfident examinee is a case of knowledge with belief, particularly dispositional belief. Herein, Kate simply was unable to access her belief at the moment of her exam due to anxiety or memory block. She, however, had the belief stored. They elicited this dispositional reading of belief that they deemed was relevant to the entailment thesis to support their claim by reversing the probes asked to participants of their study.

3. ARGUMENTS

3.1 Claim

In light of the historical and recent discussions above, I will argue for the claim that the entailment thesis is insufficient to account for all



Presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2017
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
June 20 to 22, 2017

cases of knowledge. There is a distinction between belief and acceptance. And given this distinction, I will furthermore argue that either belief or acceptance is necessary for knowledge, hence providing a modification to the entailment thesis.

3.2 Distinguishing two attitudes

Generally, belief and acceptance are attitudes people take when something is the case or something is regarded as true. Belief and acceptance are both seen in a binary connection between a subject and a proposition. They are more specifically called propositional attitudes. These are cognitive relations people have with propositions, which are specific concepts or sentences. Propositions may either be true or false. Propositions may also be believed, disbelieved, accepted, or rejected. In the sentence, "Alex believes that Paris is in France". "Alex" is the subject. The clause, "Paris is in France" is the proposition. These propositional attitudes are representational, thus they are about certain things. There is a content about which the attitude is held towards or directed to. In the sentence, "Alex accepts that the earth is round". The acceptance which Alex has, is about the earth's roundness. "The earth is round" is the content of the acceptance he has.

Belief and acceptance are mental stances a subject takes towards certain propositions. The distinction, however, lies in their voluntariness. Belief is passive, thereby involuntary. On the other hand, acceptance is active, thereby voluntary.

3.3 Conditions for believing

A subject s knows a proposition p , if and only if, p is taken to be true, and s is disposed to feel as though p . The first premise sets up the binary connection between a subject and a proposition. The relevant propositional attitude in this relationship is belief. The second premise presents the content of the belief, which the propositional attitude is about. Here, the truth-value of the content is assumed as true. The third premise displays the kind of mental stance involved. It shows the temperament or mental placement, which the subject may have with regards to the proposition. Here, feeling can be described as having the conviction that it is the case that p .

There are various descriptions that follow from the third premise. This signifies the involuntariness of belief and its passivity. Belief is a passive mental state. A subject cannot choose to

believe a proposition, a subject, can however, find that he or she feels as if p is the case or not the case. A subject cannot induce belief in oneself or others. Due to its involuntariness, a subject may just be placed in different situations to perhaps attempt to induce a belief that is never guaranteed to come about. A subject can more or less just be inclined to believe certain propositions, however this does not guarantee the activation of a belief. Belief is context-independent. One believes p regardless of the various contexts or situations he or she may be placed. The pragmatism of belief, although possible, is irrelevant to whether a belief is held or not. While beliefs may or may not be useful, this does not affect its still being upheld.

3.4 Conditions for accepting

A subject s knows a proposition p , if and only if, p is taken to be true, and s adopts p as a postulate for reasoning. The first premise sets up the binary connection between a subject and a proposition. The relevant propositional attitude in this relationship is acceptance. The second premise presents the content of the acceptance, which the propositional attitude is about. Here, the truth-value of the content is assumed as true. The third premise displays the kind of mental stance that is involved. It shows the mental process involved for the subject to act on with regards to the proposition. Here, postulate can either be defined as to assume p as a fact or to put forward that p in a basis for understanding or even arguments.

There are various descriptions that follow from the third premise. This signifies the voluntariness of acceptance. There is an act of the will involved; hence it is considered a mental activity or even a mental process. This usually signifies assent to it being the case that p . The acceptance of p can be context-dependent. The times, places, and situations during which an acceptance may or may not be adopted varies. A subject can accept one thing at a given time and then reject it or accept its negation at another time. Therefore, the acceptance of p tends to be pragmatic. What one chooses to accept at certain situations may be to the benefit of the subjects involved in the given context. It may be more useful to accept p rather than its negation during varying times and situations. The temporal aspect of acceptance sways in accordance with its ability to be acted upon or willed.



Presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2017
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
June 20 to 22, 2017

3.5 Kate accepted

In relation to the case of the unconfident examinee and the studies conducted by both Myers-Schulz and Schwitzgebel, as well as Rose and Schaffer; perhaps the sort of attitude present during Kate's studying the night before had been acceptance. Kate accepted the proposition that Queen Elizabeth died in 1603. It might also be the case that she both accepted this and believed this at the time of coming across this information or learning about it. But possible belief here is taken lightly because it does not continue to persist as a belief in a later time. During her exam as she was obviously making a guess, she did not hold the content of the belief anymore, if she ever even did. Kate did not believe that Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, in spite of her seemingly still knowing the answer by getting it right. She had lost this belief, instead of it being merely dispositional; its content was inaccessible in spite of a triggering question that ought to have elicited a sure answer. Kate did although more certainly accept the proposition while she was studying in order to use this as a context of her future reasoning, during the time supposedly of her exam. So whether Kate believed the proposition at time 1 or time 2 is irrelevant or secondary to the sort of knowledge or process of knowing involved in studying as well as test-taking. If Kate had actually believed that Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, this would not have been lost or been quite as context-dependent as it is as an acceptance, which is more susceptible to changing and swaying.

4. POSSIBLE REFUTATIONS

Many might still argue that there is no relevant distinction beyond the semantics between belief and acceptance. Furthermore arguing that it does not seem plausible for s to accept p without also believing p because speech-acts are usually a reflection of beliefs. I will argue that any connection between beliefs and acceptances to speech-acts are contingent. This is despite it being often the case that s accepts p , s believes p , and s speaks and acts as if p . Any relationship between the propositional attitudes of belief and acceptance to speech-acts, however possible and likely, are not necessary. The tendency to confound the two propositional attitudes arises from their likelihood to come after the other and vice versa. The tendency to assume a necessary link between propositional attitudes and speech acts arise

from the natural likelihood to express beliefs and acceptances, these mental stances, in the form of speech-acts. However, any link between the propositional attitudes to speech-acts is contingent. This can be seen in the paradox of lies wherein what one says or how one behaves is not, however obvious, necessarily the true content of his or her mental stance.

5. CONCLUSION

Confusion as to whether to unconfident examinee really knows and its relevant attitudes in relation to it, first and foremost provides us with an everyday example of unsure knowledge or a gray-area of knowledge in relation to its traditional criteria and definition. There is therefore a need to perhaps modify the armchair theories of knowledge. By suggesting and arguing that acceptance is the sort of relevant mental attitude and mental process involved in the case of the unconfident examinee, other cases of gray-area knowledge may be given light to and henceforth solved. The entailment thesis is no longer as limited by opening itself to more relationships with mental attitudes apart from belief.

A modification to the entailment thesis in line with these arguments hold that a subject s knows a proposition p , if and only if p is true, s either believes or accepts p , and s is justified in believing p . There are instances of knowledge, which may call for either the propositional attitudes of belief or acceptance. These may be determined by varying contexts wherein knowledge is attained and the process by which knowledge is arrived at.

6. IMPLICATIONS

The interplay of beliefs in private and public affairs are evident in the way human beings interact among themselves and the world around. What constitutes as practical and theoretical understanding is a guiding factor to daily decision-making. This proposed criteria that modifies the traditional account of knowledge, in relation to belief formation and other mental processes, has implications on various fields. It contributes to both a deeper understanding and thus new ways by which institutions may solve issues, primarily concerned with the challenges posed by diversity.



Presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2017
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
June 20 to 22, 2017

6.1 Scientific implication

The scientific enterprise, since its rise to power in Western civilization, has long been a voice of reason in the formation of knowledge and other human advancements. There are however, pitfalls and cracks, in spite of its use of rationality and reliance on empirical evidence. Politics are involved in science, particularly in the areas of medical practice and research. Belief is very much involved in what is perceived as a strictly objective endeavor. The study and modification to the entailment thesis however suggests that acceptance ought to be the sort of attitude involved in science, research, and the notable scientific method.

6.2 Religious implication

Faith is an integral aspect of religion, as well as dogma and practice. People ascribe to religion in many ways, some of which might be to accept doctrine or to believe doctrine. While there are individuals that ascribe and practice specific religious views for the purpose of conformity, respect to family tradition, or simply belonging to a community, this shows the pragmatic interplay of accepting religious dogma in contrast to authentic belief in it. Many of religious doctrine involving the nature and existence of God, an afterlife, and other mysteries require what is known as the suspension of belief in order to make room for it against our human reasoning. When belief is suspended; however, perhaps acceptance is actually taking place in lieu of this.

6.3 Political implication

There is a need to highlight the fact that religious wars have been fought throughout history. The present day existence of extremist groups and terrorism all over the globe commonly motivated by the guise of religion, exemplifies a need to be critical of religious dogma, its spread, misuse, as well as as abuse. Its proliferation especially through the widespread accessibility of information through technology and the Internet, contributes to the enterprise of war and its relationship to ideology and identity politics.

6.4 Educational implication

Lastly, the differences between beliefs and acceptances constitute for a reformation of the sort of mental attitude involved in educational institutions,

from the primary level to the university level. Acceptance ought to be the approach in learning because this allows free-thinking and promotes curiosity. To instill beliefs or to involve it in an academic institution, is to partake in forms of dogmatism and authoritarianism. This is by far the most significant and direct implication of the study because critical thinking practices adopted early on shape the way people think, interact, and therefore relate with the rest of the world. This is vital to the peace and development of the human race.

6. REFERENCES

- Bratman, Michael, *Faces of Intention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- Cohen, Jonathan, "Belief and Acceptance" in *Mind*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1992).
- Harman, Gilbert, *Change In View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- Maher, Patrick, "Acceptance without Belief" in *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).
- Myers-Schulz, B. and Schwitzgebel, E., "Knowing That P without Believing That P" in *Nous*, (New Jersey: Wiley Periodicals Inc., 2013).
- Radford, Colin, "Belief, acceptance, and knowledge" in *Mind*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- Rose, D. and Schaffer, J., "Knowledge entails dispositional belief" in *Philosophical Studies*, (Berlin: Springer Science + Business Media, 2012).
- van Frassen, Bas, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).