

What Does Weak Belief Tell Us about Full Belief?

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1) Introduction

- Full belief: the traditional epistemological notion.
 - Connections to:
 - * Assertion
 - * Reasoning (theoretical and practical)
 - * Predicting behavior
 - * Knowledge (internal indistinguishability)¹
 - Expressed in natural language by ‘sure’/‘certain’ (?).²
- Weak belief: a relatively recent object of epistemological interest.³
 - Expressed in natural language by ‘thinks’.⁴
 - Is entailed by full belief.
 - Connections to:
 - * Guessing
 - * ...?⁵
- Which is denoted by the natural language attitude verb ‘believe’?
 - I think it’s weak belief. (‘I think it will rain, but I wouldn’t say I believe it will’ just sounds like a contradiction.⁶)
 - But there is plenty of resistance.⁷
- Not clear it matters so much what the answer to this question is.⁸
 - The natural language distinction between *thinking* and *being sure* is crystal clear:
 - ✓ I think it will rain tomorrow, but I’m not sure.
 - ✓ I know he thinks this is the way to go, but is he sure?
 - And thinking is pretty clearly not equipped to play the roles traditionally associated with full belief.
- So we have reason to countenance both weak and full belief, and to ask questions about how they work.
- Central thesis: theorists of full belief have something to gain by thinking about how weak belief works.
- Two proofs of concept:
 1. Toggling and the uniqueness versus permissivism debate
 2. Moral encroachment

¹ Though see Goodman & Holguín (2022), Goodman (2023).

² Cf. Goodman & Holguín (2022).

³ At least under this guise.

⁴ As in ‘So and so thinks that p’. Perhaps also expressed by ‘suspect’, ‘is of the opinion that’, ‘guess’—cf. Hawthorne *et al.* (2016).

⁵ I think there’s a good case to be made that *intention* entails weak but not full belief. Also I think Radford (1966) makes a compelling case that knowledge entails weak but not full belief.

⁶ See, e.g., Hawthorne *et al.* (2016), Rothschild (2020), Holguín (2022).

⁷ See, e.g., Moss (2019), Nagel (2021), Clarke (2024), Williamson (forthcoming).

⁸ Well, I think there are important methodological issues at stake here, since so much theorizing about belief goes by way of judgments about natural language belief-reports. But we can suppress all that.

2) Some relevant properties of weak belief

- Weak belief is (extremely) weak.
 - You can think that p while being arbitrarily close to certain that $\neg p$.
 - Ex: weather, horse races, lotteries.
- Weak belief is question-sensitive.
 - You don't think that p *simpliciter*, you think that p *relative to a question*, $Q^?$.⁹
 - Suppose Jane has 30 of the 100 tickets to the upcoming lottery. The other 70 are divided up evenly among 70 other people.
 - Q: Who do you think will win the lottery?¹⁰
 - A: ✓ Jane (she's the most likely to win, after all).
 - Q: Do you think Jane will win the lottery?¹¹
 - A: ✓ No (there's a 70% chance someone else will win, after all).
- Weak belief is permissive.
 - Agnostic permissive: you can be as opinionated/agnostic as you want.
 - Q: Who do you think will win the lottery?
 - A₁: ✓ Jane.
 - A₂: ✓ I don't have view.¹²
 - Tie-breaking permissive: your weak beliefs can discriminate between answers you know to be equally likely.
 - Q: I'm about to flip a fair coin. How do you think it will land?
 - A₁: ✓ Heads.
 - A₂: ✓ Tails.
 - A₃: ✓ I don't know; some way or other.
 - COGENCY:¹³ It is rationally permissible for p to be the strongest thing S thinks relative to $Q^?$ just in case:
 - (1) p is a union of complete answers to $Q^?$.
 - (2) If there is a complete answer to $Q^?$, r_1 , such that r_1 doesn't entail p , then there is no other complete answer to $Q^?$, r_2 , such that: r_2 entails p , but S 's evidence supports r_1 more than r_2 .
- Weak belief is voluntaristic.
 - Weak belief doesn't supervene on credence.
 - Weak belief doesn't supervene on behavioral dispositions.
 - What's left? Acts of the will!

⁹ By 'question' I mean a partition: a set of mutually exclusive and exhaustive propositions. But for vivacity and concreteness I'll use natural language questions to talk about these partitions.

¹⁰ I.e.: $\{J, E_1, E_2, \dots, E_{70}\}$

¹¹ I.e.: $\{J, \neg J\}$

¹² Alternatively: 'I don't know', 'I can't say', 'There is no one in particular I think will win', etc.

¹³ See Holguín (2022), Dorst & Mandelkern (2023). Note that Dorst and Mandelkern call this principle "filtering".

3) Toggling and permissivism

- FB UNIQUENESS: For any agent *S*, body of evidence *E*, and proposition *p*: there is exactly one full belief attitude Φ such that: if *E* is *S*'s body of evidence, then *S* may Φ that *p*.^{14,15}

(Let FB PERMISSIVISM be the negation of FB UNIQUENESS.)

- There is an influential argument, due to White (2005, 2013), for FB UNIQUENESS:

(P1) If FB PERMISSIVISM were true, then it would be appropriate for rational agents to “toggle” their full beliefs when in permissive situations—i.e., for them to arbitrarily switch back and forth between the full belief attitudes permitted by their evidence. (Say, with pills.)

(P2) It is never appropriate for rational agents to toggle their full beliefs in this way.

(C) So FB PERMISSIVISM is false (and thus FB UNIQUENESS is true).

- I think one of the things weak belief tells us about full belief is that there is no good reason to believe (P1). This is because:
 - WB UNIQUENESS is clearly false:

WB UNIQUENESS: For any agent *S*, body of evidence *E*, and proposition *p*: there is exactly one weak belief attitude Φ such that: if *E* is *S*'s body of evidence, then *S* may Φ that *p*.
 - But nonetheless it is impermissible for rational agents to toggle their weak beliefs.¹⁶
 - So the inference from ‘Can’t toggle Φ ’ to ‘Uniqueness holds for Φ ’ looks invalid.
 - So not clear why we would accept (P1).
- Why think WB UNIQUENESS false? Horse races, coin flips, etc.
- What think toggling is impermissible for weak belief? Suppose I flip a coin way up high in the air and ask you to guess how it will land.

✗ Heads. No wait, tails. Actually heads. No, never mind; I’ve got no view. OK, no, tails—final answer!
- This kind of toggling does not inspire epistemic confidence.
- One important caveat, however:
 - Toggling *once* seems basically fine:¹⁷
 - ✓ Heads. Actually, tails.
 - ✓ I don’t know; some way or other. On second thought, heads.

¹⁴ By ‘full belief attitude’, I mean any of: being sure that *p*, being sure that $\neg p$, or being unsure whether *p* (i.e., suspending on *p*).

¹⁵ Note that this is an “intrapersonal” uniqueness principle. It’s “interpersonal” analog would put the quantification over agents within the scope of the quantification over full belief attitudes (so that fixing the body of evidence alone is enough to fix the full belief attitude). There are a number of theorists who reject the interpersonal uniqueness principle while accepting the intrapersonal one—see, e.g., Kelly (2013) Schoenfeld (2014).

¹⁶ There’s a caveat to this I will introduce momentarily...

¹⁷ Cf. Woodard’s (2020) observations about the comparative permissibility of one-off versus repeated *redeliberation*.

- Twice is where pathology starts to creep in:
 - ? Heads. No wait, tails. Actually, heads—final answer.
 - ? I don't know; some way or other. On second thought, heads.
 - No, never mind: no view!
- And thrice or more seems unhinged.¹⁸

- But if not WB UNIQUENESS, what's supposed to explain these judgments? I propose:

THE FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF WEAK BELIEF TOGGLING: Toggling a weak belief once is fine. Twice is borderline. Thrice or more is unacceptable.¹⁹

- What explains THE FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF WEAK BELIEF TOGGLING? Well, similar judgments go through with other putatively permissive attitudes, like preference and intention. So I propose:

THE FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF TOGGLING: If Φ is an (intrapersonally) permissive attitude, then toggling between Φ -states once is fine. Twice is borderline. Thrice or more is unacceptable.

- Connecting back to full belief: proponents of FB PERMISSIVISM should avail themselves of the FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF TOGGLING to answer White's challenge.^{20,21}
- What explains THE FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF TOGGLING? No idea, though we'll come back to it later.

4) *Moral encroachment*

- Stated roughly, *moral encroachment* is the thesis that the epistemic status of a doxastic state can depend on its moral features.²²
- Consider Gendler's (2011) John Hope Franklin case:

John Hope Franklin, a prominent African American historian, was attending a party at the Cosmos Club in Washington DC. In fact, this party was being held to honor his being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. While at the party, Franklin encountered a woman attendee who demanded that he fetch her coat, as she (fully) believed on the basis of his race that he was a member of the club's staff.

- A reasonably popular view: the woman wronged Franklin in virtue of holding this full belief.²³
- Moral encroachment: *because of its moral significance*,²⁴ the woman's full belief was *epistemically* unjustified.

¹⁸ Things are actually even more subtle than this: it seems fine to "toggle" one's weak beliefs by monotonically increasing/decreasing one's level of opinionatedness. What doesn't seem OK is vacillating between levels of opinionatedness (or between ties). Thanks to Jeremy Goodman for discussion here.

¹⁹ Note that if this principle is correct, then WB UNIQUENESS is a non-starter as an explanation of the badness of weak belief toggling, since one-off weak belief toggling is permissible.

²⁰ Though White has other challenges too.

²¹ Other attempts to answer White's toggling challenge while preserving intrapersonal permissivism for full belief include those of Titelbaum (2015), Weisberg (2020), and Dandelet (2023). Note that each explains the badness of full belief toggling in terms of properties of full belief that are not obviously shared with weak belief. I have worries about whether such explanations are suitably general.

²² Bolinger (2020) provides a helpful overview.

²³ That is: Franklin was wronged by her merely holding the belief, and so would have been wronged by it even if she hadn't acted on it (say, by demanding that he fetch her coat).

²⁴ Could be related to the doxastic wronging in particular. But also possible to accept moral encroachment without believing in the possibility of doxastic wronging, and instead try to explain it in terms of the subject matter of the belief, or what have you.

- Moral encroachment is controversial, but has recently gotten a lot of attention. Most of it has focused on the question of whether morality encroaches on *full belief*.²⁵
- That said, many of the motivating examples concern other doxastic attitudes, like *thinking*, *suspecting*, *being confident*, and even *suspending*.²⁶ Here's one:

Suppose I know that exactly 60% of the people involved in some event are from New York. Suppose Jones is one of those people. Knowing nothing else at all about Jones, it seems reasonable to think (suspect, guess, etc.) that he's from New York, even if I can't be sure of it. By contrast, if I know that exactly 60% of those people were involved in some crime—say, a Ponzi scheme—it's less clear that I may reasonably think (suspect, guess, etc.) that Jones is a fraudster.²⁷

Why the asymmetry? Natural thought: because the question of whether Jones is a fraudster is morally significant, whereas the question of whether he is from New York is not.²⁸

- But there is a recent argument against moral encroachment on full belief, due to Goodsell & Hawthorne (forthcoming, §§5-6):²⁹

(P1) If morality encroaches on full belief, it encroaches on weak belief.

- * The intuitive motivations it in the case of full belief look just like those in the case of weak belief.

(P2) If morality encroaches on weak belief, it encroaches on credence.³⁰

- * We should expect a uniform mechanism of encroachment across the attitudes that are subject to it, which credence provides.
- * Moreover, the appropriateness of weak belief seems to supervene on the appropriateness of credence.³¹

(P3) Morality does not encroach on credence.³²

- * If I know for certain that, of the 100 people in some room, 60 are from New York and 60 are fraudsters, and if I know for certain that I have no other relevant information about anyone in the room (including Jones), then how possibly could I assign .6 credence to the proposition that Jones is from New York but something other than .6 to the proposition that Jones is a fraudster?

(C) So morality does not encroach on full belief.

- I am convinced of both (P1) and (P3). But I think (P2) is false.
- We already know from COGENCY that credence constrains rational weak belief somewhat indirectly: knowing a person's credences only tells you the *range* of permissible weak beliefs they can have.

²⁵ Some salient exceptions include Moss (2018), King & Babic (2020), Jackson & Fritz (2021), von Klemperer (2023), and Goodsell & Hawthorne (forthcoming).

²⁶ This point is stressed by Goodsell & Hawthorne (forthcoming).

²⁷ At the very least I need to have more than .6 credence to permissibly have these attitudes.

²⁸ If weak beliefs can wrong, then plausibly the (false) weak belief that Jones is a fraudster wrongs Jones, whereas the (false) weak belief that Jones is from New York does not.

²⁹ In fact they argue against moral encroachment for *any* doxastic attitude, but I'm going to focus on the application to full belief. (They also have independent objections to certain popular arguments for full belief moral encroachment, which I won't address here.)

³⁰ Cf. Jackson & Fritz (2021).

³¹ "... given the tight connection between credence and these other doxastic attitudes, it seems impossible for the appropriateness of them to vary without corresponding variation in appropriateness of credences. If the right level of credence for you to have in two propositions is equal, then surely it is equally appropriate for you to doubt/suspect/have little credence in either of them." (p.17)

³² See their §6 for a full defense.

- E.g.: it's compatible with COGENCY that S's credence that p = S's credence that q, but that S thinks that p (relative to the question of whether p) while failing to think that q (relative to the question of whether q).
- To account for moral encroachment on *weak belief*, then, we need only add a third condition to the two provided by COGENCY—something along the lines of:³³

(3) If someone would be wronged by S's thinking that p, then S's evidential support for p is sufficiently high.

This would explain why you can permissibly think Jones is from New York, but not that he's a fraudster, despite having equal credence in the two propositions.

- Once we have moral encroachment for weak belief, we get it for every (qualitative) doxastic attitude, since all such attitudes entail thinking.³⁴ The universal mechanism of (doxastic) moral encroachment is weak belief.
- Moreover, because weak belief is voluntaristic, we get an elegant account of why weak beliefs can *wrong*: it's quite literally up to you whether you weakly believe Jones is a fraudster.
 - What about full belief? Standardly thought to be non-voluntaristic, in which case the vindication of the “wronging” intuition may not apply in the same way. On the other hand, plausibly some full beliefs are grounded in statistical evidence.³⁵ And it's less clear to me that these full beliefs aren't formed voluntaristically.³⁶
 - Here it's worth echoing an observation from Goodsell & Hawthorne (forthcoming, §1): the intuition that the woman's full belief wrongs Franklin is considerably weaker if we imagine it being formed on non-statistical grounds. (E.g., the woman mistakes Franklin for Franklin's identical twin, whom the woman knows to be a member of the staff.)

5) Primitivism?

- Should the moral encroacher be satisfied with this response to Goodsell and Hawthorne?
- Suppose Smith and Brown are both .6 that Jones is a fraudster, but that only Smith *thinks* Jones is a fraudster; Brown merely thinks the Jones is or is not a fraudster.
 - How much should Jones *care* about this difference between Smith and Brown?

³³ We'd also have to add a condition to account for the effects of moral encroachment on *suspension*—something to the effect of: (4) For any (complete or partial answer) to Q? q such that p doesn't entail q, if someone would be wronged by S's failing to think that q, then S's credence that q is sufficiently low.

³⁴ Cf. Goodman & Holguín (2022), Goodman (2024).

³⁵ See, e.g., Dorr *et al.* (2014), Goodman & Salow (2023, forthcoming). See the next margin note for an example.

³⁶ E.g., without inspecting it, you repeatedly flip a coin you know either to be fair or double-headed. In fact it's double-headed. Plausibly there is some least number n such that it is permissible for you to be sure the coin is double-headed after seeing n consecutive heads. But couldn't it be up to you whether it's after n flips you're sure it's double-headed versus $n + 1$ or what have you? Phenomenologically speaking, it feels like a matter of making up one's mind when to start being sure.

- With the exception of what they’d report themselves as thinking, this difference makes no difference to what they’d be willing to assert, take for granted in reasoning, or which bets they’d be willing to accept.
- So it looks an awful lot like a difference that makes no difference.
- Still, the intuitive contrast between thinking Jones is a fraudster and thinking Jones is from New York is hard to resist.
- What to make of this? Two natural options:³⁷
 - Error-theory about the appearance of moral encroachment in the case of weak belief.
 - * But then why trust the judgments in the case of full belief?
 - Primitivism about moral encroachment on weak belief.
 - * That is: accept that morality encroaches on weak belief, but acknowledge that from a “design” perspective there’s no good reason for it to do so.
 - * Pressure to say the same about the effects of moral encroachment on full belief?³⁸
- Similar points go through for the norms on toggling.
 - It’s hard to see what, if anything, goes badly for agents who toggle their weak beliefs.
 - But the impression that there is something wrong with weak belief toggling is strong.
 - So we should either look for an error-theory about the anti-toggling intuition for weak belief, or accept that the norm against weak belief toggling is primitive.
 - And whichever way we go on weak belief, there is pressure to go the same way for the other attitudes subject to anti-toggling norms (preference, full belief, and so on).
- General moral: the epiphenomenality weak belief tells in favor of primitivist accounts of certain norms on full belief.

³⁷ Cf. Jackson & Fritz (2021).

³⁸ Of course there’s also a relevant asymmetry between weak and full belief, which is that full belief doesn’t seem epiphenomenal in the way weak belief does. But it would be surprising if the judgments underlying moral encroachment were being driven by distinct mechanisms in the two cases. So even if there is a rational reconstruction of the effects of moral encroachment on full belief, I’d sooner call it a happy accident.

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