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Confidence in one's social beliefs: Implications for belief justification

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ABSTRACT

Philosophers commonly define knowledge as justified true beliefs. A heated debate exists, however, about what makes a belief justified. In this article, we examine the question of belief justification from a psychological perspective, focusing on the subjective confidence in a belief that the person has just formed. Participants decided whether to accept or reject a proposition depicting a social belief, and indicated their confidence in their choice. The task was repeated six times, and choice latency was measured. The results were analyzed within a Self-Consistency Model (SCM) of subjective confidence. According to SCM, the decision to accept or reject a proposition is based on the on-line sampling of representations from a pool of representations associated with the proposition. Respondents behave like intuitive statisticians who infer the central tendency of a population based on a small sample. Confidence depends on the consistency with which the belief was supported across the sampled representations, and reflects the likelihood that a new sample will yield the same decision. The results supported the assumption of a commonly shared population of representations associated with each proposition. Based on this assumption, analyses of within-person consistency and cross-person consensus provided support for the model. As expected, choices that deviated from the person's own modal judgment or from the consensually held judgment took relatively longer to form and were associated with relatively lower confidence, presumably because they were based on non-representative samples. The results were discussed in relation to major epistemological theories – foundationalism, coherentism and reliabilism.

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1. Introduction

There have been extensive discussions in the philosophy of mind on beliefs and their epistemic justification. Different positions have been advanced and there have been heated disputes over the strengths and weaknesses of each position. In this article, we address the question of belief justification from a psychological point of view. This examination will be carried out with reference to some of the current philosophical positions.

The present study can be seen to join the growing movement to investigate traditional issues in philosophy through empirical research. Indeed, philosophers subscribed to the emerging experimental philosophy approach (Bortolotti, 2008; Feltz, 2009; Loussouarn, Gabriel, & Proust, 2011) have begun to use methods of psychology, sociology, behavioral economics, and cognitive science to help shed some light on philosophically important questions (see Knobe, 2007; Michaelian, 2012; Thagard, 2002, 2009). Traditional philosophical questions have been tested empirically within a wide range of domains including moral responsibility and free will (Feltz & Cokely, 2009), ethics (Nichols, 2004), intentional action (Knobe, 2003), semantic categorization (Machery, Mallon, Nichols, & Stich, 2004) and epistemology (Feltz & Zarpentine, 2010; Swain,

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Alexander, & Weinberg, 2008; Wright, 2010). In this study we focus on the question of epistemic justification, examining how empirical observations on people's convictions in their beliefs may bear on the cardinal philosophical approaches to belief justification. We hope that this project will contribute to the constructive interaction between empirical work on metacognition (Koriat, 2007) and philosophical work on epistemic justification.

Standard epistemological accounts of knowledge treat knowledge as a species of belief. In the philosophical Traditional Analysis of Knowledge (TAK), propositional knowledge is defined as Justified True Belief (JTB). This definition assumes three requirements. First, I cannot know *P* unless *P* is true. That is, truth is a defining property of knowledge. Second, I cannot know *P* if I do not even believe in *P*. Finally, my belief in *P* must be justified, that is, I must have some compelling account of the truth of *P*. This condition is intended to rule out mere lucky guesses (but see Gettier, 1963).

Philosophical theories of knowledge are concerned not only with descriptive theories of how people think but also in developing normative theories of how people ought to obtain knowledge (Thagard, 2009) as will be discussed later. Psychologists, who are more concerned with descriptive than normative issues, have been much more liberal in the use of the terms *knowledge*. This term has been sometimes used to refer only to a particular subjective feeling (e.g., Gardiner & Richardson-Klavehn, 2000), and sometimes to the correspondence between that feeling and the actual state of affairs (Kirkham, 1992). For example, some psychologists asked, "how do people know that they do not know?" (Glucksberg & McCloskey, 1981; Kolers & Paley, 1976). Also the question "how does one know that one knows" has been intended to mean "what are the psychological processes that lead to the feeling that one knows?" but it has been interpreted also to mean "why are people successful in knowing that they know?" Whereas the former meaning focuses on "knowing" as a subjective state irrespective of its correspondence to reality, the second meaning implies that what the person knows is true (see Koriat, 1993). The focus on "knowing" as a subjective state, has led experimental cognitive researchers to the examination of belief justification primarily in terms of the degree of confidence with which a belief is held, or in terms of the assessed probability that a proposition is correct.

1.1. Philosophical theories of belief justification

In philosophy, in contrast, there have been extensive discussions of what makes a belief justified or reasonable so that if true, it will be *known* to be so. In order to define justification we have to ask justification of what (Kirkham, 1992). In this article we focus on the epistemic justification of a belief in contrast to a moral justification and a utilitarian justification (see Reber & Unkelbach, 2010). According to *foundationalism*, some beliefs are justified on the basis of other beliefs. However, there are noninferential basic beliefs that are justified without owing their justification to any other beliefs (Van Cleve, 2005). Justified basic beliefs are generally assumed to include beliefs about simple logical or mathematical truths and beliefs about one's own mental state (however, moderate foundationalists include perceptual beliefs and memory beliefs as well). Thus, foundationalism assumes that there are justified basic beliefs, and that all justified nonbasic beliefs derive their justification from their relation to justified basic beliefs (Lemos, 2007).

By postulating the existence of basic beliefs, foundationalists escape the regress problem. According to this problem, any belief requires a justification, but the justification itself requires support, so that there is an infinite regress of (potential) justification (see Moser, 1988). The postulation of justified basic beliefs by foundationalism terminates the regress of justification.

An alternative solution of the regress problem has been proposed by proponents of the *coherentism* position. Coherentists challenge the linear conception of justification, which the regress argument presupposes. Instead, they hold a holistic conception of justification, in which a belief is justified by the way it fits together with the rest of the belief system of which it is a part (BonJour, 1985). Coherence theory avoids the problem of infinite regress without granting a special status to a particular class of beliefs.

A prominent feature of some of the foundationalist theories and the coherentism position is their *internalist* character: Epistemic justification is assumed to depend only on matters that are within the cognitive grasp of the believer. The assumption is that something that is not accessible to the believer's awareness cannot be used to justify a belief (see Chisholm, 1989; Conee & Feldman, 2001). This position has been challenged by proponents of *reliabilism* – one of the leading versions of the *externalist* view of epistemic justification. According to reliabilism, what makes a belief justified is the reliability of the causal process by which it was produced. That is, a belief is justified if the process that leads to its adoption has a high probability to produce true beliefs. A belief can be justified even if the process that leads to it and its reliability are inaccessible to the believer. What matters is reliability itself, and degrees of beliefs may vary depending on the degree of reliability (see Goldman, 1976, 1988; Reber & Unkelbach, 2010).

In everyday life however, people often form their beliefs on the basis of imperfect informational sources. When the source is unreliable, as is often the case with testimony, metacognition is needed to solve the justification problem. Michaelian (2012) proposed to distinguish between the process in which some information is generated that can serve as the content a belief, and the process in which the accuracy of that content is evaluated in order to endorse it as a belief or reject it. It is the reliability of the latter, metacognitive process that counts in assessing process reliabilism. Assuming that people rely on a variety of criteria for evaluating the accuracy of the content of a potential belief, the endorsement of that belief can be conceptualized to depend on the overall subjective confidence in the accuracy of the information, so that when confidence surpasses a preset threshold, the belief can be endorsed. The implication is that the content of the information submitted to the endorsement mechanism may vary in a continuous manner along a dimension of subjective confidence. Indeed, philosophers

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