

Review of: "Either you know or you've gotta believe"

Mieszko Tałasiewicz¹

¹ University of Warsaw

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The aim of the article is to reject the "entailment thesis" - the commonly accepted view that knowledge is a kind of belief (belief that meets some additional conditions). The author tries to achieve this by showing that "knowledge and belief are diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive".

I believe that the argument in the article is largely based on some misunderstanding and therefore only to a small extent achieves its purpose.

The author assumes, namely, such a meaning of the word "belief", in which it is a nominalization of the colloquial sense of the verb "to believe".[i]

The author presents convincing arguments that to believe and to know are separate mental processes under certain interpretations (although I do not venture to assess the validity of her detailed proposals, according to which "to believe" is associated with action and "to know" expresses a passive inventory of information possessed by the subject). Under these interpretations, indeed, none of these processes is a component, let alone a basis, of the other, and perhaps they can even be considered mutually exclusive.[ii]

However, contrary to the author, I think that the opposition between "to believe" and "to know" hardly contradicts the "entailment thesis" and the traditional understanding of knowledge as a special form of belief. The point is that the notion of belief in this understanding is much more general. It is not limited to the meaning in which "belief" is a simple nominalization of "to believe" coming from everyday language, but belongs to technical jargon and basically means any propositional content "recognized by the subject". In epistemology, we need a general concept that would cover any propositional content of any attitude of any subject. In this sense p is a belief iff $[\text{Exists}]s[\text{Exists}]A A(s,p)$, where s is any subject and A is any propositional attitude.[iii] [Sorry for my being unable to insert properly the quantifiers]

It just so happens that the word "belief" is used to express this general meaning in English. However, this is a technical sense, detached from the simple nominalization of "to believe". It is worth noting that in other languages this role is performed by words not at all related to the equivalents of "to believe" in these languages. For example, in Polish "to believe" means "wierzyć"; the nominalization of this verb is the word "wierzenie". Meanwhile, the technical equivalent of the general meaning of the word "belief" in Polish epistemological terminology is a completely different word "przekonanie" (also detached from the colloquial meaning of the verb "przekonywać"). From this perspective, deliberations on the relationship between knowing and believing may appear as an idiosyncratic idiomatic peculiarity of English.

Based on the aforementioned definition of belief, the entailment thesis cannot be rejected as it is simply tautological. This also explains why this thesis "has been considered by the majority as uncontroversial" without much ado in traditional epistemology.

Another matter is to identify the relevant components of the concept of knowledge. Thanks to Gettier, we know that mere truth and justification of belief are not enough. At this point, I will omit enumerating the suggestions for supplementing the JTB-theory that appeared in the epistemology of the post-Gettier literature. It is worth noting, however, that even pre-Gettier form of JTB-theory contained an additional component, beyond truth and justification. This component is some form of "endorsement" of the belief in question. Our general definition includes in the category of beliefs all propositions toward which any subject holds any attitude, including those that some subject ignores, rejects, or doubts. They do not constitute the subject's knowledge, even if they are otherwise true and justified.

This raises the task of specifying the form of "endorsement" that would be sufficient for a given belief to be a component of knowledge. The idea that the subject must believe that *p* is an unfortunate (and most likely unintentional) addition by Gettier himself. The authors from whom he drew the concept of JTB-theory do not use the word "believe". Ayer provides a rather strong condition here, that "S is sure that P is true," while Chisholm limits it to the formulation "S accepts P" (Gettier 1963, 123).

One can attempt even less demanding formulations. For example, within the framework of mental file theory, for a subject to have a standing belief *P(a)*, it is enough to have a mental file connected to the object *a* containing the predicate *P*. The subject does not have to believe that *P(a)*, in any way connected to "mental assent," "decision-making," or "action". [iv] Buckwalter, Rose, and Turri characterize it in a similarly minimalist way, and simply speak of "a cognitive pro-attitude recognizing the truth of *p*" (Buckwalter, Rose, and Turri 2015).

The author mentions the solution proposed by these authors, which distinguishes between "thin belief" and "thick belief," but considers it "desperate" and "vain." However, she does not present convincing arguments in favor of her opinion. Based on the considerations summarized above, I believe that, on the contrary, the solution proposed by Buckwalter, Rose and Turri is reasonable and heading in the right direction. It is possible to maintain that mental states associated with believing are indeed different from those associated with knowing; and at the same time claim that knowledge requires endorsing a certain kind of propositional content called "belief" in the broad sense (or "thin belief").

In conclusion, the text is interesting and valuable as it draws attention to certain arguments in favor of the thesis that the mental states described by the common usage of the verb "to believe" are different from the mental states described by the common usage of the verb "to know." However, it is not convincing as an argument in favor of the thesis that the philosophical concept of knowledge cannot be based on the philosophical notion of belief. It is rather an attempt to change the subject. Paradoxically, it may serve as a warning and a reminder that epistemologists should not be too quick to use linguistic intuitions derived from phraseological associations and not rely on bon-mots and untranslatable puns of one language or another. Technical philosophical terminology is meant, among other things, to detach philosophical theory from such arbitrary conditioning.

References

Buckwalter, Wesley, David Rose, and John Turri. 2015. "Belief through Thick and Thin: Belief through Thick and Thin." *Noûs* 49 (4): 748–75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12048>.

Gettier, Edmund. 1963. "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23: 123–123.

Tałasiewicz, Mieszko. 2022. "Files Are Mental Particulars: A Rejoinder to the Relationist Challenge." *Synthese* 200 (6): 450. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03932-3>.

[i] A similar comment concerns Cook Wilson's opinion, mentioned by the author, according to which "judgment" is presented as a correlate of "to judge".

[ii] In this latter case, the author's arguments are very brief, and the thesis of the exclusion of knowledge and beliefs is therefore rather unsubstantiated. However, it is reasonable to assume that there is no entailment between them in either direction.

[iii] We encounter a similar situation in ontology, where the general concept of "object" aims to be the most general concept enabling us to talk about anything. Keeping in mind this general sense, Quine observed that the question "What is there?" should be answered with "Everything". An object is just whatever there is.

[iv] More on standing beliefs in the mental files framework in (Tałasiewicz 2022). It is worth noting that such an approach allows the analysis of the so-called "tacit knowledge", i.e. knowledge that is not actively processed in the mind and may even be unconscious.