

(This shorter version is for those who just want the main gist of the puzzle and the account of doubt. A longer version is forthcoming in *Synthese*.)

### A New Puzzle about Belief, Doubt, and Confidence

[Word Count: 2998]

**Abstract.** In this paper, I introduce a new puzzle about the relationship between three psychological states: doubt, belief, and confidence. The puzzle takes the form of three propositions that seem plausible but are jointly inconsistent. In section 1, I lay out the puzzle. In section 2, I lay out four ways of responding to the puzzle. In section 3, I present my novel account of doubt and how it provides a solution to the puzzle. Roughly, one has doubt if and only if one believes one might be wrong; I argue that this is superior to the account that says that one has doubt if and only if one has less than the highest degree of confidence. [Word Count: 116]

Keywords: Doubt, Confidence, Belief

### **Introduction**

In this paper, I introduce a new puzzle about the relationship between three psychological states: doubt, belief, and confidence. The puzzle takes the form of three propositions that seem plausible but are jointly inconsistent. In section 1, I lay out the puzzle. In section 2, I lay out four ways of responding to the puzzle. In section 3, I present my novel account of doubt and how it provides a solution to the puzzle.

### **1. The Puzzle**

Here is the first proposition:

A: Many ordinary, unreflective beliefs, such as those referred to in the classroom scenario, are held without accompanying doubt.

The classroom scenario is as follows:

Classroom Scenario: It is an ordinary day and you are going to teach your class. Unlike many epistemological scenarios, there are no bizarre twists in

this one. As you walk into your classroom, you are unreflectively forming all sorts of ordinary beliefs, such as the beliefs that *my chair is tilted diagonally*, *attendance is pretty good today*, and *the class clown is here*.

Very plausibly, these beliefs are formed and held without corresponding doubt. For, as we consider this ordinary scenario, it seems that you do not also have some doubt that *my chair is tilted diagonally* or some doubt that *attendance is good today* or some doubt that *the class clown is here*. You just form the beliefs without doubt, and that's that. In describing this scenario, I intend to describe what happens to most of us when we walk into a classroom.

Now, you *could* form some doubt about these propositions. The student who looks like the class clown could say with a serious look on his face, "I'm actually the twin brother from out of town." This might cause you to have a very tiny bit of doubt that he is the class clown. But, in *my* scenario, no student says any such thing; as I said, the scenario is completely ordinary. And (A) is about whether there *is* doubt, not about whether there *could* be doubt. So, it is plausible that, in these ordinary scenarios that we daily find ourselves in, many of our unreflective beliefs are formed without doubt.

Here is the second proposition:

B: *S* has some doubt that *p* if *S* has a doxastic attitude toward *p* and does not have the highest degree of confidence that *p* (i.e., does not have a degree of confidence that *p* that is 1).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is part of standard probability theory to assign the number 1 to the highest degree of confidence that *p* (when one is certain that *p*) and the number 0 to the lowest degree of confidence that *p* (when

(B) is a very natural way to view the relationship between confidence and doubt. Indeed, adding an 'only if' would make (B) a complete analysis of doubt, but I'll stick with the weaker 'if', since that will be sufficient for my puzzle.

As I understand the term 'doxastic attitude', *S* has a doxastic attitude toward *p* if and only if *S* believes, withholds, disbelieves, or has some degree of confidence toward *p*. One way to not have the highest degree of confidence that *p* is to not have formed *any* doxastic attitude toward *p*. Most adults, even if educated, have never formed a doxastic attitude toward the proposition that *actualism is true*. They neither have the highest degree of confidence toward it, nor do they have any doubt about it. But if one *does* form a doxastic attitude toward *p*, and if one does not have a degree of confidence of 1 toward *p*, then it *seems* to follow that one has at least a little doubt that *p*. So, if I currently do not have a degree of confidence of 1 that *actualism is true* after forming a doxastic attitude toward that proposition, then it seems that I must have *some* doubt about it. These considerations support (B).

Linguistic evidence also supports (B).<sup>2</sup> Suppose I said,

1) "I'm not completely confident that *p*, but I have no doubt that *p*."<sup>3</sup>

(1) seems inconsistent. This is evidence that the first conjunct entails the denial of the second, which would be expected if (B) were true. Or consider the following dialogue:

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one is certain that  $\sim p$ ) and the numbers in between 0 and 1 to the varying degrees of confidence in between. I am assuming here that there *is* a highest degree of confidence.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to --- for help in formulating the following considerations.

<sup>3</sup> --- has objected that 'complete confidence' does not indicate the highest degree of confidence. I disagree. However, notice that we could replace (13) with "I have less than the highest degree of confidence that *p*, but I have no doubt that *p*." This also seems inconsistent. However, since we are less likely to talk this way in ordinary language, I will stick to "complete confidence" talk. Thanks to -- for this helpful suggestion for how to respond to ---.

Victoria: Are you completely confident that  $p$ ?

Danny: No, I'm not completely confident that  $p$ .

Victoria: So you have some doubt that  $p$ ?

Danny: I didn't say that. I also don't have any doubt that  $p$ .

Victoria should be confused because the absence of complete confidence seems to entail the presence of doubt. These linguistic considerations also support (B).

Here is the third proposition:

C: Many ordinary, unreflective beliefs, such as those referred to in the classroom scenario, are not held with the highest degree of confidence (do not have degree of confidence 1).

Some philosophers think that we have a degree of confidence 1 toward only a small set of propositions – propositions such as *I exist* or *I am thinking* – a set that would exclude the ordinary, unreflective beliefs mentioned in (A). This is motivated by betting behavior tests for degrees of confidence. Consider the following quote by Richard Jeffrey:

how momentous it may be to assign probability 1 to a hypothesis. It means you'd stake your all on its truth, if it's the sort of hypothesis you can stake things on. To assign 100% probability to success of an undertaking is to think it advantageous to stake your life upon it in exchange for any petty benefit (1992: pp. 1–2).

I take it that many ordinary, unreflective beliefs do not meet this test.

Furthermore, even apart from betting behavior tests, it just seems possible that you could have a higher degree of confidence toward those propositions. For suppose I paused, took a more careful look at the class, and formed the belief, "Yes, this is *definitely* a good showing today." I then take roll and check my attendance

sheet, noticing that this is the best attendance I've had all semester. It seems that, in this process, my degree of confidence that *attendance is good today* would have increased. So, (C) seems well supported.<sup>4</sup>

Our puzzle is complete: (B) and (C) together entail the denial of (A). Each at least *seems* plausible. How should we respond?

## 2. Four Ways of Responding to the Puzzle

The first way is to say that the inconsistency is merely apparent. At least one of the terms – perhaps 'doubt' or 'confidence' – means different things in at least two of the sentences.<sup>5</sup> This response, what I call the 'equivocation response', is how we would respond to the following 'puzzle':

- 2) Aristotle went to the bank.
- 3) If Aristotle went to the bank, then he is beside water.
- 4) Aristotle is inside a building with no water nearby.

There is a plausible scenario where each of (2)–(4) all seem true, and yet (2) and (3) seem to entail the denial of (4). The response is obvious: 'bank' is ambiguous, and its different meanings are expressed in at least two of the sentences. The equivocation response has also been used in more serious philosophical contexts.

For example, Keith DeRose (1995) has famously argued that we mean different

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<sup>4</sup> Clarke (2013) and Greco (2015) have recently argued that, given some assumptions, belief just is credence 1 (in certain contexts). It is not obvious how relevant their work is to (C). Greco (2015, 180) says he is using 'belief' in a technically defined sense, and he seems to take Clarke to be doing the same. On the other hand, I intend to mean by 'belief' what it means in ordinary English. Furthermore, Clarke does not mean by "belief to degree 1" anything that entails certainty (2013, 11), whereas my discussion is about the highest degree of confidence (or certainty). Lastly, nothing they say counts against my argument that it seems that my degree of confidence *could* increase, and therefore, my initial confidence was not the highest degree of confidence.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to --- for pushing me to address this point.

things by 'knows' in the sentences comprising the premises of a plausible skeptical argument and a sentence expressing an ordinary knowledge claim. So, one might claim that there is some ambiguity or context-sensitivity in (A)–(C).

The equivocation response is at best incomplete without some reason for it. It is *obvious* that 'bank' is ambiguous. DeRose (2010) gives many independent reasons for thinking that the meaning of 'knows' is context sensitive. On the other hand, there do not seem to be good reasons for thinking that 'belief', 'doubt', or 'confidence' mean different things in these sentences. Admittedly, my being unable to think of ways to vindicate the equivocation response does not prove that it has no vindication. However, at this point, I leave it up to an actual equivocation responder to come up with one. In the meantime, I am inclined to just think that (A)–(C) are more straightforwardly like

- 5) Socrates was a man
- 6) If Socrates was a man, then he was mortal
- 7) Socrates was not mortal

than like (2)–(4). And just as we should reject (7), we should reject one of (A)–(C). So, I now move on to finding the best candidate for rejection.<sup>6</sup>

Consider (A), that many ordinary unreflective beliefs, such as those in the classroom scenario, are formed without doubt. Here are two possible objections to the claim that there is no doubt in the classroom scenario. First, one could claim that there *is* doubt, but it is unconscious. As such, it is not a salient feature of the scenario, and so our intuitions are not sensitive to it. Second, one could claim that

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<sup>6</sup> I respond to the equivocation response more fully in the longer version of this paper.

there is doubt, but our intuitions are misled by imprecision in language. Suppose that after I have finished drinking a glass of lemonade, there are still little drops left at the bottom. You ask, "Is there any lemonade in the cup?" I say, "No, there is no lemonade." This sentence seems correct to say. But of course, there might still be some lemonade left because there are the little drops. Similarly, although it seems correct to say about the classroom scenario, "There is no doubt toward those propositions," perhaps this is compatible with there still being some doubt.<sup>7</sup>

I am unconvinced by both objections. In the lemonade case, one can focus on the relevant proposition that *there is no lemonade left* by just focusing on the sentence, "There is *absolutely and literally*, not even a tiny bit, of lemonade left." That sentence *does* clearly express the proposition *there is no lemonade left*, and that sentence seems false because there are the little drops left. On the other hand, the sentence, "When you walked into the classroom, you had absolutely and literally no doubt that *the class clown is here*" still seems true. You just believed that *the class clown is here*, but there really was no accompanying doubt that he was there.

What about the claim that you have unconscious doubt? The intuition that there is no doubt, whether conscious or unconscious, is made clearer if we consider what a bit of doubt *would have* been like. If someone told you that the class clown has a visiting twin in town, it seems that you might then *come to have* some doubt. It seems that your doubt would be newly formed, not an unconscious doubt rising to consciousness. These intuitions support the claim that you never had any doubt in the first place. So, upon examination, (A) still seems plausible.

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<sup>7</sup> This second objection and my response are motivated by Peter Unger (1975, 63–87). The first objection arose in conversations about the puzzle.

Consider (C), that many ordinary unreflective beliefs, such as those referred to in the classroom scenario, are not held with the highest degree of confidence. Above, I considered two reasons for accepting (C). First, I appealed to a betting behavior test: I would not be willing to bet my life, for a petty benefit, on the truth of one of those propositions. One might point out that there are strong objections to betting behavior tests being accurate measures of our degrees of confidence.<sup>8</sup> That discussion would take us too far astray. I will just note that it is one way of attacking the first reason in favor of (C) that I find promising. My own reason for accepting (C) is the second one: plausibly, one's degree of confidence in those propositions *could possibly* increase, and that is sufficient reason to not reject (C).

The fourth possible solution is to reject (B), that *S* has some doubt that *p* if *S* has a doxastic attitude toward *p* and does not have the highest degree of confidence that *p*. This is the option I prefer. In the following section, I present my account of the nature of doubt and show how it provides a solution to the puzzle.

### **3. Solution to the Puzzle and a New Account of Doubt**

As a first approximation, my account of doubt states,

Doubt<sub>1</sub>: *S* has some doubt that *p* if and only if *S* believes that it's possible that  $\sim p$ .

Although Doubt<sub>1</sub> will require a minor adjustment, it represents the core of my account of doubt and is why I believe (B) is false. It should be clear how Doubt<sub>1</sub> supports (A) by explaining the intuitions that there is no doubt in the classroom

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<sup>8</sup> See Plantinga (1993, 118–119), Foley (1993, 150–153), and especially Eriksson and Hajek (2007).

scenario: one has not come to believe that *my chair might not be tilted diagonally*, that *attendance might not be pretty good today*, and that *the class clown might not actually be here*. (You would believe that last proposition if you believed that the class clown has a twin brother in town.) So, Doubt<sub>1</sub> explains why the unreflective beliefs that *my chair is tilted diagonally*, *attendance is pretty good today*, and *the class clown is here* could be propositions that you have a doxastic attitude toward, but toward which you have no degree of doubt. Doubt<sub>1</sub> is also *compatible* with (C). Although Doubt<sub>1</sub> determines that the beliefs in the classroom scenario are without doubt, it does not determine that you have the highest degree of confidence.

Doubt<sub>1</sub> is incompatible with (B). As I just said in the discussion of (A), Doubt<sub>1</sub> determines that you do not have doubt in the classroom scenario. On the other hand, according to (B), *S* has some doubt that *p* if *S* has a doxastic attitude toward *p* and does not have the highest degree of confidence that *p*. In the classroom scenario, you do have a doxastic attitude toward the relevant propositions but do not have the highest degree of confidence toward them; you thereby instantiate the antecedent of (B). So, (B) determines that you *do* have doubt in the classroom scenario. Hence, Doubt<sub>1</sub> and (B) are incompatible; they conflict in their determination of whether you have doubt in the classroom scenario. And intuitively, Doubt<sub>1</sub> has the correct verdict; hence, the classroom scenario is a direct counterexample to (B).<sup>9</sup>

But what about the linguistic evidence in *favor* of (B)? Recall the sentence,

1) "I'm not completely confident that *p*, but I have no doubt that *p*."

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to --- for helpful conversation that helped clarify the reasoning in this paragraph.

and the earlier dialogue:

Victoria: Are you completely confident that  $p$ ?

Danny: No, I'm not completely confident that  $p$ .

Victoria: So you have some doubt that  $p$ ?

Danny: I didn't say that. I also don't have any doubt that  $p$ .

In cases in which one *makes a claim* about one's degree of doubt or confidence, one's belief is not unreflective. Since Danny is an ordinary human being, if he knowingly claims that he is not completely confident that  $p$ , then he has formed the belief that  $p$  might be false. According to Doubt<sub>1</sub>, it follows that he *does* have doubt, which explains the seeming inconsistency in both (1) and also the sentences in the dialogue. (B) seems natural and plausible because we are not used to thinking about unreflective cases. So, Doubt<sub>1</sub> both explains the intuitions in my classroom scenario and also undercuts the evidence in favor of (B). The puzzle is solved.<sup>10</sup>

Some have objected that there is still a *meaning* of 'doubt', according to which (B) is true. Such people embrace the *equivocation response* and say that on one meaning of 'doubt' – one which I favor – you don't have doubt in the classroom scenario; but on another meaning of 'doubt' – where 'doubt' means *has a doxastic attitude but not the highest degree of confidence* – you do have doubt. Then both (A) and (B) could come out true. Perhaps the puzzle can be solved this way.

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<sup>10</sup> One might be concerned by my use of first person ascriptions instead of the third person. But note that it does not always seem inconsistent to say of the person in the classroom scenario, "S/he is not completely confident that the class clown is there, but s/he has no doubt that he's there." Cases of unreflectively formed belief, such as the classroom scenario, are just those cases where such statements can be true.

My reply is simply to emphasize that the classroom scenario is a *counterexample* to the claim that ‘doubt’ means *has a doxastic attitude but not the highest degree of confidence*. Imagine someone who resisted Gettier’s (1963) cases by saying,

“Well, I admit that there is a meaning of ‘knows’ according to which Jones does not know that *the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket*.

Fortunately, there is another meaning of ‘knows’ – where ‘knows’ just means *justified, true belief* – according to which Jones *does* know that proposition.”

Gettier should reply by emphasizing that his scenario is a *counterexample* to that definition of knowledge; hence, ‘knows’ does *not* mean justified, true belief. So, just as this is not a good objection in the case of ‘knows’ and Gettier cases, it is not a good objection in the case of ‘doubt’ and my classroom scenario.<sup>11</sup>

Doubt<sub>1</sub> predicts the right intuitions in most cases. However, it requires some fine-tuning. Consider that some epistemologists do not take skepticism seriously in the slightest bit. They might say, “Well, I think it’s *possible* that I’m beguiled by an evil demon, and so I don’t have hands, but I don’t have the slightest bit of doubt that I have hands. I just can’t take that possibility seriously.” There seems to be no inconsistency in this speech. As such, I think that it provides us with a counterexample to Doubt<sub>1</sub>.<sup>12</sup>

I therefore propose the following revision:

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<sup>11</sup> One could *stipulatively define* ‘doubt’ to mean *has a doxastic attitude but not the highest confidence*, just as one could stipulatively define ‘knows’ to mean *justified true belief*. Then there *would* be a meaning of ‘doubt’ according to which (B) is true. But then we would no longer be talking about doubt, just as we would no longer be talking about knowledge.

<sup>12</sup> Thanks to --- for helpful conversation.

Doubt<sub>2</sub>: *S* has some doubt that *p* if and only if *S* believes that  $\sim p$  is possible, and it's not the case that *S* believes that the possibility that  $\sim p$  is insignificant. Doubt<sub>2</sub> both blocks the above counterexample and also has all of the earlier advantages of Doubt<sub>1</sub>.

The longer version of this paper includes a detailed explanation and defense of Doubt<sub>2</sub>. Now, despite that defense, given the many ingenious, counterexample-making philosophers in our profession, I hold to Doubt<sub>2</sub> with some doubt. In other words, I believe it might be false, and I don't believe that possibility is insignificant. However, in addition to my goal of presenting a counterexample-free account of doubt, I am also interested in 1) presenting an interesting, new puzzle; 2) illuminating our understanding of doubt; and 3) getting the issue of what doubt *is* on the table. Despite the prominence of *doubt* in the history of philosophy – back to Descartes and further – it is surprising that so little time has been spent on it by analytic philosophers. I believe that Doubt<sub>2</sub> is a step in the right direction, and I welcome further counterexamples or alternatives to it to further our understanding of doubt.<sup>13</sup>

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