

Book Review

Jessica Brown, *Fallibilism: Evidence and Knowledge*.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 197 pp.

If I were lucky enough to enjoy the experience of sitting in a pub with a couple of friends on a Friday night, I would certainly not complain. But would I be justified to claim that I *know* that I am in the pub with them? I just might be dreaming or hallucinating this pleasant event. Conversely, if I were to sit at my desk having proved that $7+5=12$ by relying on Peano's axioms, would I be able to say that I *know* this to hold for my system? Surely there is a substantial difference between the two situations. It appears to me that although I might be dreaming that I proved this simple mathematical claim, it is not possible that I am *not* in the state of knowing that it holds. Of course, the grand majority of my beliefs are more similar to the former situation than the latter. Most of my beliefs are about my experiences, not formal mathematical proofs. And even though it appears I am much more inclined to say that $7+5=12$ holds than that I am, in fact, in the pub with my friends, I would want to say that I know both these things.

In her book, *Fallibilism: Evidence and Knowledge*, the author Jessica Brown tackles this issue from a fresh perspective, as she recognizes that the problem of the explanatory gap between evidence and knowledge has been central to the 20th and 21st-century epistemology. As many philosophers had taken a stand in saying that one's evidence for p can rarely conclusively establish that p , the concept of knowledge was shown to be quite troublesome. How am I to say that I *know* that p without possessing conclusive evidence that p ? Or, in Brown's formulation, how am I to say that I *know* that p if p might be false? Three positions are widely advocated in their respective attempts to answer this question: (1) fallibilism, exemplified by the claim that one can know that p while retaining the possibility of p being false, i.e., evidence not guaranteeing that p , (2) infallibilism, exemplified by the claim that one can know p only if their evidence conclusively points to p , and finally (3) skepticism, claiming that the gap between evidence and knowledge is unbridgeable, and hence that one can, in fact, know very few things, if any.

As one can make an educated guess from the book's title, Jessica Brown has opted for the fallibilist account of knowledge. Throughout the course of 8 chapters, she examines the most persuasive accounts of fallibilism and infallibilism in their respective attempts to navigate the epistemic battlefield, managing somehow not to fall into the skeptic's trench of unknow-

ability. Brown's representation of opposing theories is very bona fide; her arguments are clear and do not seem to obfuscate the matter. The book's preface offers a simple yet informative guide for the reader, presuming only the basic knowledge of concepts in contemporary epistemology. The organization of chapters is also well-thought-out and easy to follow, as each chapter tackles a discrete point in the discussion. The transition between the chapters is also often seamless, making reading the book quite pleasurable.

Before we get into the overview of the chapters in the book, a couple of points of terminological clarification ought to be made. The author uses the term *shiftiness* to describe the original conception of knowledge in the infallibilist theory, proposed by Lewis in 1996. Although in itself quite problematic, this account gave a new rise to infallibilist theories at the end of the century, which have since become quite dominant. Lewis's shifty knowledge, as Brown describes it, is closely bound to the theory of epistemic contextualism, which claims that the attribution of knowledge depends, at least to some degree, to something in the context of the person who attributes knowledge to the subject. For this reason, epistemic contextualism is often referred to as attributor contextualism. This is basically why Brown uses the term shifty conception of knowledge, as non-context dependent theories of knowledge are, in essence, invariantist. In other words, invariantism promotes universal theory of knowledge attribution. The other concept that probably needs some clarification is a *generous conception of evidence*. Now, what exactly does generosity have to do with evidence? It stands to reason that to bridge the obvious gap between evidence and knowledge, one might try either weaken the concept of knowledge, as was the case with Lewis's contextualism, or opt for reframing the concept of evidence. If the conception of evidence is rendered inclusive enough, the gap will be closed. This kind of manoeuvre stretches the conception of evidence from covering only the claims about our experiences to claims about the external world as well. If one has no problem attributing our claims' content from the external world, bridging the gap might be quite an unproblematic task. But more on this later on.

It would appear useful to actually get to know Brown's main opposition, the authors who will attempt to defend infallibilist theories regarding evidence and knowledge. Even though they can be viewed as proponents of the same theoretical position, their respective views on how to attain the infallibilists' goal of bridging the aforementioned gap are, in fact, very different. As I have already briefly touched upon Lewis's contextualist attempt to construct a shifty knowledge-based theory, it would be best to turn our attention to the other couple of authors that Brown cites as representative of their respective approaches. The first of them is John McDowell, whose disjunctivist epistemology opens the door for the infallibilist position. As Brown eloquently put it: "Disjunctivists about experience hold that the state of its looking to one as if p may be constituted either by one's seeing that p or it's merely appearing to one as if p" (3). McDowell continues on this line of argumentation by claiming that in optimal conditions when one is in a state of experiencing something, "it is a matter of the fact itself being disclosed to the experienter." Such a position obviously allows McDowell to claim a non-shifty non-sceptical infallibilism, however Brown sees his

conception of evidence as being much too inclusive, as will be evident in her criticism. The other author discussed by Brown in the book who attempts to construct a non-shifty non-skeptical account of infallibilism is no other than Timothy Williamson. His knowledge-first program considerably impacted the contemporary discourse of epistemology by giving knowledge explanatory priority when addressing the process of epistemic justification. And although put in the same basket of infallibilism, his approach radically differs from one taken by McDowell. Williamson claims that the subject's knowledge, in fact, *is* subject's evidence. If that holds, the consequence is that when one is in a state of knowing that *p*, then *p* is his evidence that *p*. This entailment, as Brown says, makes *p*'s probability 1. In other words, possessing knowledge that *p* guarantees *p*, making his position unambiguously infallibilist.

In this book, Jessica Brown chooses to attack both accounts of non-shifty non-skeptical infallibilism by claiming that their liberal approach to the concepts of evidence and knowledge leads to undesirable philosophical implications. She also recognizes that the objections made to the fallibilist theories also hold for the infallibilist ones. Her considerations finally push forward the idea that if both groups of theories, fallibilist and infallibilist, generate virtually the same philosophical problems, one should opt for fallibilism as it at least doesn't stretch the concepts of evidence and evidential support unnecessarily.

Now that we have settled the basics of the discussion, let us turn to a short overview of the chapters in the book. The first chapter elaborates on the positions of fallibilism and infallibilism, with Brown selecting the most persuasive accounts of both worlds, at least in her own view. She examines the motivations behind infallibilism and claims that the main one is the unintuitive view of the fallibilists that one can *know p* while maintaining that *p* might not be true. In short, the first chapter is mainly expositional, setting up the stage for arguments of both sides.

The second chapter deals with the account of infallibilism that she chose to address, claiming that the externalist commitments made by its proponents in the context of evidential support are largely untenable. The three commitments she recognizes as philosophically and intuitively problematic are: (1) factivity, the commitment to *p* being evidence only if it is true, (2) sufficiency of knowledge for evidence, the commitment to the claim that if *S* knows that *p*, then *p* is a part of *S*'s evidence, and finally (3) sufficiency of knowledge for self-support, the commitment to the claim that if *S* knows *p*, then *p* constitutes, at least in part, evidence *for p*.

As Brown introduced these three infallibilist commitments in the second chapter, she decided to focus on the commitment of sufficiency of knowledge for self-support in the third chapter. She specifically challenges this commitment by claiming the theorists who accept it has to answer the question of why it usually appears infelicitous to have *p* as evidence for itself. She attempts to see if this commitment is defensible by accepting one of the probabilistic accounts of evidential support but ultimately deems them quite controversial.

The fourth chapter constitutes her final case against accepting infallibilism by putting forward an argument which questions factive concep-

tion of evidence, viz. knowledge constituting evidence only if it is true. She supports this by appealing to the thought experiment of a subject and its counterpart BIV, who share some experience which adequately represents the state of affairs in the world for the subject, but not for BIV. For example, let us imagine that both the subject and BIV have the experience of eating dinner; however, only the subject's experience, in fact, corresponds to what is going on. By accepting the commitment of factivity, one ought to say that only the subject is justified in his belief, being right about his belief. She notes that the infallibilists attempt to defend this commitment by claiming the strawman fallacy in opposition's argument; they state that the opponents criticised equal blamelessness in accepting a belief instead of equal justification. She argues that the defense is unsuccessful in its endeavor since it fails to recognize that "on the knowledge view of justification, justification cannot play key roles traditionally played by justification, including providing a graded and propositional notion of justification" (22).

In the fifth chapter of the book, Brown settles accounts with the principle of epistemic closure, which is often seen as one of the more appealing reasons for accepting infallibilism. She rightly argues that if the principle of closure fails due to some external reason, it becomes irrelevant which theory, fallibilist or infallibilist, is better calibrated for it. She attempts to show that the closure principle fails due to epistemic defeat, which means that the introduction of new information can cause the existing beliefs to lose ground in their respective justifications. This chapter probably offers more contribution to the discussion than any other in the book.

The sixth chapter capitalizes on an epistemic defeat that Brown advocates, with a focus on the undermining defeat. This type of epistemic defeat consists of the subject being provided new information that renders their justification process of a belief invalid, but does not support the opposite claim either. She considers so-called level-splitting views that are based on higher-order evidence which should inhibit the justification of subject's beliefs, but ultimately concludes that they result in untenable accounts of theoretical and practical reasoning, making them philosophically problematic.

The seventh chapter constitutes Brown's defense of fallibilism when faced with its difficulty handling practical reasoning and concessive knowledge attribution. This problem for fallibilism is often used as a reason for accepting infallibilism; however, she again makes her case by showing that infallibilism faces the same issues and argues that both positions have a wide array of options and adequate instruments for dealing with them.

Finally, in the last chapter of her book, she provides a comprehensive summary of reasons for accepting fallibilism, despite criticism often thought to be detrimental to the theory. She argues that both fallibilists and infallibilists have much room for maneuver in defending their respective theories.

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