

Acceptable Premises: An Epistemic Approach to an Informal Logic Problem, James B. Freeman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, Pp. xiv, 401.

According to Freeman, a premise offered in support of some claim is acceptable without supporting argument if and only if it meets the following five conditions:

1. *Presumed reliability of the belief-forming mechanism*: There is a presumption that there is a high objective probability that the mechanism producing belief in the premise will reach the truth if it is functioning properly, operating in a cognitive environment for which it is suited, and operating according to a design plan or aspects of a design plan aimed at arriving at the truth.

2. *Presumed proper functioning*: There is a presumption that the mechanism producing belief in the premise is functioning properly.

3. *Presumed suitable cognitive environment*: There is a presumption that the mechanism producing belief in the premise is operating in a cognitive environment for which it is suited.

4. *Presumed orientation towards the truth*: There is a presumption that the mechanism producing belief in the premise is operating according to a design plan or aspects of a design plan aimed at arriving at the truth.

5. *Further inquiry too costly*: The expected cost of acquiring more evidence relevant to the truth of the premise is higher than the expected cost of accepting the premise if it is false.

The first four conditions amount to a *presumption of warrant*, i.e. a presumption that the author's belief in the truth of the premise is warranted in the sense articulated by Plantinga in his (1993). The fifth condition Freeman labels the *pragmatic condition* for basic premise acceptability.

Freeman construes arguments dialectically, as an attempt by a proponent of some claim to justify it to a challenger. From the proponent's point of view, it is enough if the challenger accepts a proposed premise. But Freeman is after *acceptability*, not just *acceptance*. A premise is *acceptable*

without supporting argument if and only if the challenger must either concede it or present a case against it. This is the challenger's perspective. With its modal "must", it takes Freeman from the descriptive to the normative, i.e. from dialectics to epistemology.

Despite his appropriation of Plantinga's conditions for warranted belief, Freeman focuses not on belief in ultimate premises but on their acceptance. Following Cohen (1992), he defines belief as a disposition to feel that a proposition is true, acceptance as taking the proposition as a premise for deciding what to do or think in a particular context. The focus on acceptance provides Freeman with a handy response to extravagant ultra-sceptical demands for certainty of one's basic premises: such demands are a recipe for a foolish paralysis.

Freeman's argument for his general theory is straightforward. By definition, a challenger is obliged to concede a premise or to present a case against it if and only if there is a presumption that the premise is true. And such a presumption requires a presumption of warrant: if there is no presumption that belief in the premise has been produced by a reliable mechanism, or if there is no presumption of proper functioning or of a suitable cognitive environment or of orientation to the truth, there is no presumption that the premise is true. The pragmatic condition is added to cope with situations like belief in the identity of a killer produced by the testimony of a single eye-witness; we want further investigation before conceding the killer's identity, because of the high costs of accepting this proposition if it happens to be false.

The condition of presumed reliability prompts a classification of statements according to the personal mechanisms producing basic belief in them. *Logically determinate statements* include all statements that are necessarily true or necessarily false in a broad logical sense: not only formally and semantically true statements and their contradictories, but also conceptual, mathematical and metaphysical truths and falsehoods. Besides deducing such statements from axioms, we can in some

cases come to believe them, and to believe that they are necessary, through understanding what they mean. This process Freeman calls “*a priori* intuition”, and he takes it to wear its presumed reliability on its face, since something whose understanding brings with it a recognition of its necessary truth is self-evident. The defeasibility of *a priori* intuition, illustrated by the deniability of Euclid’s parallels postulate and the inconsistency of Frege’s comprehension axiom for the existence of sets, no more undermines its presumed reliability than the defeasibility of sense-perception undermines the presumed reliability of sense-perception.

As for *logically indeterminate statements*, Freeman appropriates and modifies the traditional rhetorical classification of such statements into descriptions, interpretations and evaluations. *Evaluations* characterize things as good or bad, or better or worse, or preferable or avoidable; acts as right or wrong, or as obligatory, permissible or forbidden; persons or characters as praiseworthy or blameworthy; actions as morally good or morally bad (101). Among non-evaluative statements, *descriptions* have purely extensional truth-conditions, with no reference to possible worlds; whereas *interpretations* have intensional truth-conditions, with a reference to possible worlds.

Three personal mechanisms generate basic beliefs in *descriptions*: perception, introspection and memory. As for *perception*, we have original physical perception that something external to us causes the smells, flavours, sounds and tactile and visual sensations that we experience; original personal perception of the vocal utterances, gestures and other features of our fellow human beings as revelatory of their mental states; acquired physical perception of that in which the causing of a certain sensed quality resides; and acquired institutional perception of events described by the rules of an institution, such as a soccer player’s scoring a goal. Freeman defends the presumed reliability of the first three types of perception on the basis of an argument taken from the 18th century Scottish common sense philosopher Thomas Reid: it is part of our constitution to form basic beliefs in this

way. Acquired institutional perception he holds to be presumptively reliable if the rules of the institution have been learned.

Introspection produces beliefs about mental contents (e.g. pains, appearances to our senses) and about mental operations (e.g. perceiving, remembering, reasoning). Such beliefs are obviously reliable, because their content is just the mental content or operation of which we are immediately aware.

Beliefs about personally witnessed past events and states of affairs produced by *memory* are presumptively reliable if sufficiently vivid or distinct. So is the belief produced by memory that one's own identity persists over time. It is part of our constitution to form such beliefs this way.

Interpretations are or involve subjunctive conditionals, of the form: if *A* were true, then *B* would be true. Such conditionals are true in a world *w* if and only if *B* is true in any world nomically inclusive of *w* in which *A* is true and the relevant variables affecting *B* have the same values as in *w* (153). They can be physical (*if a certain match were struck with sufficient force, in the presence of oxygen, the match being dry, then it would light*), personal (*if Arthur were to believe that taking his umbrella was necessary to achieve his goal of keeping dry, then Arthur would take his umbrella*), or institutional (*if Betty were to bequeath \$100,000 to Carol, then Carol would receive \$100,000 after Betty's death*). The mechanisms giving rise to basic beliefs in such conditionals are the corresponding kinds of intuition: physical, personal, institutional. Physical intuition gives rise to detection of variation and imposition of a category such as causal dependency or natural kind; causal hypotheses suggested by physical intuition are not presumptively reliable, since they require testing to rule out alternatives, but beliefs that some property is essential to a natural kind (*apples contain seeds*) are presumptively reliable, as Kornblith (1993) has argued, if generated by natural kind guided intuition. Personal intuition generates presumptively reliable beliefs about other people's

dispositional mental states (e.g. anger or benevolence), their proximate beliefs and intentions, and their empathetically grasped emotional reactions to types of situations; it also generates basic beliefs about psychological causation and about others' non-proximate beliefs and intentions, but such basic beliefs are not presumptively reliable. Basic beliefs produced by institutional intuition are presumptively reliable if and only if it can be presumed that the believer has learned correctly the rules of the relevant institution, as evidenced by ability to act in accordance with them or correctly understand others' doing so. From these conditions for the presumptive reliability of basic beliefs in subjunctive conditionals, Freeman deduces the conditions for the presumptive reliability of basic beliefs in various kinds of interpretations: those expressing general nomic connection (general causal statements, dispositional statements, ascriptions of belief and intention, attributions of sign); those equivalent to conjunctions of descriptions and expressions of general nomic connection (singular causal statements, interpretive classifications); truth-functions of subjunctives generated by a personal basic belief-generating mechanism; ascriptions of subjunctive or nomic necessity and possibility.

Among beliefs in *evaluations*, Freeman distinguishes judgments of intrinsic non-moral value (*suffering is intrinsically bad*), judgments of moral obligation (*one ought to keep one's promises*), and judgments of moral value (*patience is a virtue*). Our *moral sense* generates basic beliefs in "descriptive" evaluations of these three types, whereas *moral intuition* generates basic beliefs in "interpretive" evaluations that support subjunctive conditionals.

Experiencing a state of affairs as involving some satisfaction or dissatisfaction is sufficient evidence that it is *prima facie* intrinsically good or intrinsically bad; hence value judgments based on such an exercise of one's moral sense are presumptively reliable, as is the judgment of moral intuition that satisfaction is a reason for *prima facie* intrinsic goodness and dissatisfaction for *prima*

facie intrinsic badness. Our capacity for empathy extends this reliability to judgments based on what others feel. Judgments of the intrinsic goodness (or badness) of something whose contemplation as part of a state of affairs brings satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) are also presumptively reliable. To defend the presumptive reliability of these basic beliefs in intrinsic value or disvalue, Freeman again appeals to its being a first principle of our constitution to form such judgments on the basis of such experiences.

We also form a basic judgment that persons have intrinsic value, a judgment manifested in a respect for persons as such. Following MacLagan (1960a, 1960b), Freeman takes this judgment when basic to result from the so-called “Agape-response”, an experience of moral concern for others that is a joint product of our general consciousness of obligation and of the practical concern for others that develops from our feeling imaginatively what others feel. He defends the presumptive reliability of this judgment on the familiar ground that it is generated by factors that are part of our constitution, in this case our sense of obligation and our capacity for sympathy.

Recognition that particular acts are *prima facie* duties arises from four types of moral sentiments. Sympathy discloses duties of beneficence, non-maleficence and reparation; fairness duties of equity, reciprocity and impartiality; a sense of personal integrity duties of self-improvement and self-respect; fidelity duties of promise-keeping and not lying. The moral sentiments generate such judgments as a result of the desire for affiliation to others that children develop through attachment to their parents. Empathy leads us to recognize the effect on attachment and affiliation to others of acts connected with the four sentiments, and hence through our capacity for active sympathy and our general sense of moral obligation to form a judgment that a particular act is a *prima facie* duty. Since the capacities so exercised are part of our constitution, a deontic belief generated by their exercise in response to empathetic recognition of affiliative consequences is

presumptively reliable, provided that the mechanisms generating the interpretation on which the belief is based are presumptively reliable. A similar account holds for general judgments of *prima facie* rightness or wrongness resulting from a projection by personal intuition that an act of a certain type will have certain affiliative consequences.

The moral goodness or badness of a character consists in the adoption of certain goals or commitments; derivatively, we can work out the “aretaic” value or disvalue of desires, actions and feelings. If we discern correctly the commitments, feelings or desires of someone, we form a presumptively reliable judgment of their moral goodness or badness by taking the point of view of the “agapic spectator”, an abstract personification of conscience that combines empathy with a commitment to active concern for the well-being of others and to the performance of duty. Freeman responds to the obvious objection that the concept of the agapic spectator is a projection of culturally specific values, as well as to objections against the theory that human beings have a moral sense.

The mechanisms so far discussed for forming basic beliefs are *personal*, in the sense that they involve a single individual forming a belief on the basis of his or her own experiences, independently of reliance on the word of others. But, as Freeman points out, most of our basic beliefs result from the *interpersonal* mechanism of taking the word of someone else, which in some cases amounts to relying on testimony. A proponent’s statement in a dialectical exchange is testimony from the challenger’s point of view if and only if the challenger is aware of signs that the proponent is vouching for the statement and has the competence, authority or credentials required to make the statement truthfully (291). *Personal testimony* to what a proponent perceives, introspects or remembers perceiving or introspecting is presumptively reliable if and only if there is a presumption of reliability for the belief that the proponent is offering testimony, for the sincerity of the proponent’s vouching and for the reliability of the process through which the proponent’s presumed

belief was generated. The presumption of reliability for *testimony received through a chain* diminishes with the length of the chain if the transmission is purely linear but, as Coady (1992) argues, may even increase with convergent testimonies received through independent chains. *Expert testimony*—a statement in an authority-conferring field by a recognized expert in that field—is presumptively reliable unless the presumption is undercut by such factors as clashing testimony, vested interest and prejudice. *Common knowledge*, consisting of shared beliefs that have come to us through often unrecognized interpersonal sources of the previously mentioned types, is presumptively reliable. There is a presumption for *the word of the news media* in so far as it consists of descriptions by a news organization for which there is a presumption of reliability, but not for interpretations and evaluations asserted or suggested by news reports. *Institutional testimony* such as that provided by maps, road signs and posted railway timetables is presumptively reliable if there is a presumption of reliability for the institutional perception of the artefact that communicates it and for the competence of the source that has produced this artefact.

On the basis of his general theory of basic premise acceptability and his discussion of the conditions under which basic beliefs in various types of statements are presumptively reliable, Freeman proposes a systematic approach to what he calls *epistemic casuistry*, the working out in particular cases of whether a basic premise is acceptable. Such casuistry proceeds by determining first what type of statement the premise is, then what source vouches for it, then whether this source creates a presumption for the statement. Whether it creates such a presumption depends on whether the source is presumptively reliable (the first condition for basic acceptability), whether it is epistemically compromised in this situation (by failure to meet the second, third or fourth condition for basic acceptability), and whether the expected cost of acquiring more evidence relevant to the truth of the premise is higher than the expected cost of accepting the premise if it is false (the fifth,

pragmatic condition for premise acceptability). Freeman works through schematically how these questions are to be answered for the various combinations of types of statements and types of sources vouching for them. It should be noted that the source need not be the word of the argument's proponent; it might for example be the challenger's own perception, or common knowledge.

Freeman essentially adopts Plantinga's *Reidian foundationalism* (1993), but prefers to call it *commonsense foundationalism*, because it accords with common sense and corresponds to the views of philosophers other than Reid, such as Peirce and G. E. Moore. He defends foundationalism on the ground that noetic structure should mirror argument structure, which is foundationalist in working from basic premises to conclusions and not accepting circular reasoning. He defends common sense on the ground that it is the only plausible approach.

Space does not permit a comprehensive critical appraisal of Freeman's theory of basic premise acceptability, but it should be clear from the preceding summary that it is a substantial achievement, worked out in considerable detail. Sceptics will wonder whether Freeman's appeal to immediate awareness, in the case of introspection and *a priori* intuition, is sufficient to establish the presumptive reliability of basic beliefs resting on it. Do things of which we are immediately aware necessarily have the properties that we think they do? Do mistakes require mediation? Likewise, sceptics will doubt Freeman's appeals to the first principles of our constitution in the case of perception, memory, physical and personal intuition, moral sense and moral intuition. Is every first principle by which we form beliefs presumptively reliable? For example, could we not be so constituted that vivid memories of our own past experiences are generally mistaken? Such scepticism is only partially allayed by taking the beliefs produced by immediate awareness and our constitution to be only presumptively reliable, and by requiring proper functioning, a suitable cognitive environment and orientation to the truth for this presumptive reliability. A full rejoinder requires

appeal also to the coherence of the basic beliefs formed by the operations of immediate awareness and our constitution, once allowance is made for improper functioning, unsuitable cognitive environments, orientations to values other than truth, and defeaters. Thus commonsense foundationalism rests partly on meta-coherentism.

One may also wonder whether Freeman has the correct pragmatic condition for basic premise acceptability. Suppose the testimony of a single alleged eye-witness is the only evidence that Jones killed Smith. Suppose that the costs of getting further evidence relevant to who killed Smith exceed the costs of believing falsely that Jones is Smith. Should we then accept as a premise that Jones killed Smith? It seems not, since the costs of a false conviction are high and eye-witness testimony is known to be sometimes false, even given proper functioning, a suitable cognitive environment, orientation to the truth, and the absence of defeaters. It is not so much the costs of further investigation that need to be taken into consideration as the expected benefit or cost of accepting the premise, taking into account the relevant probabilities and values. More work needs to be done on the pragmatic condition for basic premise acceptability.

Freeman's theory will not convince proponents of alternative basic approaches to argumentation and rationality. Dialectical theorists like the Dutch theorists Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst (2004) will resist the postulation of a situation where a challenger is obliged by some trans-dialectical standards to concede a premise or present a case against it; they will say that in the end any epistemic standards for basic acceptability have to be the product of agreement between participants in a discussion. Relativists about rational belief, such as Mark Vorobej (2006), will refuse to castigate as irrational persons of a more sceptical temper who do not succumb to the charms of Reid's argument from the first principles of our constitution to the presumptive reliability of basic beliefs formed in accordance with them under Plantinga's conditions for warranted belief.

Other, more specific objections are possible. For example, Freeman shows no awareness of objections raised in the 1960s to the covering law model of causal explanation.

None of these possible rejoinders should detract from the value of Freeman's work. He has written a fine book. His appeals to common sense rang true to this reader, and will probably ring true to most readers. A particular merit of his foundationalism is its breadth. Unlike the logical empiricists of the Vienna Circle, who recognized as basic statements only protocol sentences reporting things that could be directly observed on a particular occasion by the senses, Freeman recognizes a wide range of mechanisms by which human beings form basic beliefs of a great variety. In particular, his recognition of moral sense and moral intuition as generating presumptively reliable basic beliefs is an important contribution to the epistemology of ethics.

References

Coady, C.A.J. 1992. *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Cohen, L. Jonathan. 1992. *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Eemeren, Frans H. van, and Rob Grootendorst. 2004. *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation : The Pragma-dialectical Approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kornblith, Hilary. 1993. *Inductive Inference and Its Natural Ground: An Essay in Naturalistic Epistemology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

MacLagan, W.G. 1960a. "Respect for persons as a moral principle – I." *Philosophy* **35**: 193-217.

MacLagan, W.G. 1960b. "Respect for persons as a moral principle – II." *Philosophy* **35**: 280-305.

Plantinga, Alvin. 1993. *Warrant and Proper Function*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Vorobej, Mark. 2006. *A Theory of Argument*. New York: Cambridge University Press.