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# How to be an infallibilist

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5 **Abstract** While fallibilism has been the dominant view in epistemology in recent  
6 times, the field has witnessed the rise of a new form of infallibilism. In a recent  
7 book, Jessica Brown has taken on the task of mounting a systematic defence of  
8 fallibilism against this new infallibilism. She argues that new infallibilism incurs  
9 several problematic commitments that fallibilism can avoid. In addition, the key  
10 data points that infallibilists have adduced in support of their view can be accom-  
11 modated by fallibilism, giving fallibilism the upper hand. This paper develops a  
12 rejoinder on behalf of new infallibilism. It explores ways in which new infallibilists  
13 can avoid the problematic commitments Brown identifies and provides reason to  
14 think that some of the data points supporting new infallibilism cannot be as readily  
15 handled by fallibilism as Brown would have us think.  
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- 20 1. Most contemporary epistemologists are fallibilists they think that you can know  
21 a proposition,  $p$ , even if your evidence does not entail that  $p$ . While fallibilism  
22 may seem obviously true, it is worth noting that a new form of infallibilism has  
23 been on the upswing in recent literature, due to a significant extent to Timothy  
24 Williamson's (e.g. 2000) influential work. For present purposes, the key thesis  
25 of Williamson's version of infallibilism is that evidence is knowledge; or, to be  
26 more precise, a proposition,  $p$ , is part of one's evidence if and only if one knows  
27 that  $p$ .

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28 Jessica Brown's Fallibilism: Evidence and Knowledge Offers a thorough defence  
 29 of fallibilism against new infallibilism. More specifically, her central aim is to show  
 30 that epistemologists who also want to be non-sceptics and want to endorse a non-  
 31 shift view of knowledge attributions should be fallibilists rather than infallibilists.  
 32 To this end, Brown argues that there is reason to think that fallibilism compares  
 33 favourably with new infallibilism when it comes to evidence and evidential support.  
 34 Perhaps most importantly, Brown identifies and takes issue with three key  
 35 commitments of the new infallibilist's view of evidence, to wit:

36 The Factivity of Evidence If  $p$  is part of one's evidence, then  $p$  is true.

37 The Sufficiency of Knowledge for Evidence If one knows that  $p$ , then  $p$  is  
 38 part of one's evidence.

39 The Sufficiency of Knowledge for Self-Support If one knows that  $p$ , then  $p$   
 40 is evidence for  $p$ .

41 Since fallibilists can avoid these commitments, the thought goes, fallibilism scores  
 42 points against new infallibilism. On the other hand, Brown also looks at a number of  
 43 data points that might be thought to support the new infallibilism over the fallibilist  
 44 rival, including the closure principle for knowledge, defeat, practical reasoning, and  
 45 concessive knowledge attributions and argues that the new infallibilism does not  
 46 fare better on any of these counts. The scorecard thus, according to Brown, favours  
 47 fallibilism at the end of the day.

48 We think that there are ways to be an infallibilist that survive Brown's excellent  
 49 arguments. Thus, in what follows, we will explore ways in which new infallibilism  
 50 can resist both Brown's case against infallibilism and her fallibilist response to at  
 51 least some of the data points that have been thought to favour the new infallibilism.

52 2. Let's start by looking at Brown's argument against The Sufficiency of  
 53 Knowledge for Evidence, i.e. the claim that if one knows that  $p$ , then  $p$  is part of  
 54 one's evidence. Brown's key idea is to appeal to citable evidence. She points  
 55 out that one cannot felicitously cite  $p$  when queried about one's evidence for  $p$ ,  
 56 not even if one knows that  $p$  (49–50). But given that knowledge is sufficient for  
 57 evidence, it is hard to see why this should be the case.

58  
 59 Note, however, that fallibilists, too, will need an account of when  $p$  is part of  
 60 one's evidence. We can think of a few options here: if  $p$  is justified for one/if one  
 61 believes that  $p$ /if one justifiably believes that  $p$ , then  $p$  is part of one's evidence.  
 62 Crucially, since knowledge entails justified belief, their view entails the Sufficiency  
 63 of Knowledge for Evidence, no matter which of these options the fallibilist goes for.  
 64 This means that in cases in which one knows that  $p$ , it is equally hard for fallibilists  
 65 to explain why one cannot cite  $p$  when queried about one's evidence for  $p$ . In this  
 66 way, there is no reason to think that new infallibilist is at a disadvantage here.



67 3. Let's move on to the second claim, The Sufficiency of Knowledge for Self-  
68 Support, i.e. that if one knows that p, then p is evidence for p. Why think that  
69 new infallibilists are committed to this claim in the first place? Here is Brown:

70 To see why the infallibilist should embrace the Sufficiency of knowledge for  
71 self- support, consider [...] knowledge by testimony, inference to the best  
72 explanation and enumerative induction. It's hard to see how one has evidence  
73 for what's known in these ways which entails what's known without allowing  
74 that if one knows that p, then p is part of one's evidence for p. [...] So, it  
75 seems that embracing the Sufficiency of knowledge for self-support is the best  
767 way for the infallibilist to avoid scepticism. (Brown, 2018, 43)

78 We agree that it may be hard for fallibilists to see how one can have the evidence for  
79 what is known here unless one subscribes to The Sufficiency of Knowledge for Self-  
80 Support. However, the same is not true of new infallibilists. Note that according to  
81 new infallibilism, what one's evidence is will turn on worldly states, e.g. on how  
82 friendly an epistemic environment one finds oneself in. For instance, what one's  
83 evidence for the claim that there is a barn before one is may vary depending on  
84 whether one is in normal or in fake barn county. But once this point is properly  
85 appreciated, there is little reason to think that testimony, IBE and enumerative  
86 induction pose a particularly difficult problem. While data from testimony,  
87 inference to the best explanation and enumerative induction may not entail what  
88 is known, they may when conjoined with a sufficiently friendly epistemic  
89 environment.

90 4. This leaves the Factivity of Evidence p is part of one's evidence only if p is true.  
91 Brown relies on a familiar line of objection to this claim. Here is Brown:

92 As is well-known, this conception of evidence [which combines the Factivity  
93 of Evidence with The Sufficiency of Knowledge for Evidence] is open to the  
94 objection that it holds that certain pairs of subjects who are intuitively equally  
95 justified in some claim (e.g. a person and her BIV twin), are not equally  
976 justified. (Brown, 2018, 22)

98 Brown considers a response on behalf new infallibilists in terms of blamelessness.<sup>1</sup>  
99 They key idea is that while BIVs don't believe justifiably, they are nonetheless  
100 blameless for their beliefs. At the same time, there is empirical evidence that  
101 suggests that we are prone to mistaking cases of unjustified but blameless belief for  
102 cases of justified belief, which is why intuition leads us astray in these cases.

103 According to Brown, this move remains unsuccessful. Her strategy is to look at a  
104 number of ways of analysing what blamelessness amounts to and to argue that none  
105 of these ways will do the trick for new infallibilists.

106 One worry that arises here is that even if Brown's argument goes through, this  
107 may be because there is a problem with the analyses of blamelessness she considers  
108 rather than with new infallibilism. Setting this aside, though, one more important  
109 worry for Brown's objection here is a dialectical one. Let's take a step back and

1FL01 <sup>1</sup> See, Brown (2017: 70–3).



110 have a look at the dialectic. Here is what we have so far: (1) the datum to be  
 111 explained—the positive intuition concerning the epistemic status of the BIV’s  
 112 belief, and (2) the empirical data suggesting that we can’t discriminate between  
 113 justification-triggered positive intuitions on the one hand and blamelessness-  
 114 triggered positive intuitions on the other. If so, the datum that needs to be  
 115 accommodated by any theory in order for it to be extensionally adequate is a  
 116 disjunctive one: that there is either justification or blamelessness present at BIV  
 117 scenarios. New infallibilism does accommodate this datum via the second leg of the  
 118 disjunction. As such, new infallibilism is extensionally adequate. If this is so,  
 119 however, it would seem it is not on the shoulders of the new infallibilist to bring  
 120 evidence that they are right that BIV cases feature blamelessness; after all, their  
 121 theory is extensionally adequate, in that it’s compatible with the datum. Rather, if  
 122 one wants to develop an objection to infallibilism, it is on the shoulders of the  
 123 objector to adduce evidence that new infallibilism is extensionally inadequate—i.e.,  
 124 that they cannot explain the datum after all. Note also that the distinction between  
 125 blameless norm violation and norm compliance is a well-established, extremely  
 126 plausible, and indeed uncontroversial: on pain of lack of prior plausibility, any  
 127 account of any phenomenon whatsoever needs to be compatible with this  
 128 distinction. Infallibilism is, and it deploys this distinction to account for the BIV  
 129 datum and to show that more work needs to be done if one objects to infallibilism.

130 Furthermore, while it is true that the particular infallibilists that Brown discusses  
 131 have historically held a view that equates justification and knowledge, this is  
 132 optional to new infallibilisms. There has been a surge of views in the literature that  
 133 explain justified belief in terms of knowledge (like the new infallibilists Brown  
 134 discusses) without identifying justified belief and knowledge (e.g. Bird, 2007,  
 135 Ichikawa, 2014, Kelp, 2018, Lasonen-Aarnio Forthcoming, Miracchi, 2015,  
 136 Schellenberg, 2018, Simion, 2019). Champions of these views have argued at  
 137 great length that these views can allow for agents in bad cases (e.g. BIVs) to be  
 138 justified. If so, they can successfully explain the intuition at issue here. At the same  
 139 time, and crucially, this view of justification is entirely compatible with new  
 140 infallibilism. After all, what is key to new infallibilism is a view about the relation  
 141 between knowledge and one’s evidence.

142 5. We have provided reason to think that Brown’s case against the new  
 143 infallibilism leaves the door open for being an infallibilist in a number of  
 144 ways. In what follows, we will look at her defence of fallibilism against some of  
 145 the motivations for infallibilism. More specifically, we will first look at whether  
 146 new infallibilism can be supported by appealing to the idea that knowledge is  
 147 closed under competent deduction (‘Closure’).

148  
 149 According to Closure, if one knows  $p_1, \dots, p_n$ , if one competently deduces  $q$   
 150 from  $p_1, \dots, p_n$ , and if, on that basis, one comes to believe  $q$ , then one knows that  
 151  $q$ .<sup>2</sup> Closure is widely regarded as a highly intuitive principle and one that promises

2FL01 <sup>2</sup> See Hawthorne (2004) and Williamson (2000: 117) for similar formulations of Closure.



152 to explain one important way in which we can expand our knowledge. Now,  
153 suppose fallibilism is true. More specifically, suppose that knowledge is compatible  
154 with certain (sufficiently small) amounts of risk of error such that one can know that  
155  $p$  even when the probability of  $p$  on one's evidence is smaller than 1. At the same  
156 time, knowledge is incompatible with certain (sufficiently large) amounts of risk of  
157 error. As a result, there is reason to think that Closure will fail. To see this, let  $r$  be  
158 the maximum amount of risk of error compatible with knowledge. Suppose you  
159 know that  $p$  and you know that  $q$  and that the amount of risk of error in each case is  
160  $r$ . Now suppose that you competently deduce  $p \& q$  from what you know and that  
161 you come to believe that  $p \& q$  based on this deduction. According to fallibilists,  
162 you don't know that  $p \& q$ . This is because the risk of error for  $p \& q$  is larger than  
163 the risk of error for  $p$  and the risk of error for  $q$ . And since the risk of error for  $p$  and  
164 the risk of error for  $q$  are already the maximum amount of risk of error compatible  
165 with knowledge, your belief that  $p \& q$  is bound to fall short of knowledge. In  
166 contrast, on the new infallibilist view, one knows that  $p$  only if the probability of  $p$   
167 on one's evidence is 1. In other words, on new infallibilism, knowledge is not  
168 compatible with any amount of risk of error. As a result, there is no room for risk of  
169 error to agglomerate and Closure can be preserved.

170 In response to this apparent problem for fallibilism, Brown argues that there is  
171 independent reason to think that Closure fails, no matter whether you are a fallibilist  
172 or an infallibilist. In particular, cases of defeat serve to refute Closure. Suppose you  
173 know that  $p_1, \dots, p_n$ , competently deduce and thereupon come to believe  $q$ .  
174 Assuming Closure holds, you now know that  $q$ . But now suppose that a reliable  
175 informant's testimony leads you to believe, mistakenly, that you have been slipped a  
176 drug that compromises your deduction abilities. In this case, your knowledge that  $q$   
177 is defeated. At the same time, since you may not have arrived at any of the premises  
178 via deduction, the same does not hold for the premises. So, you continue to know  
179 the premises and we have a counterexample to Closure. Since Closure fails on  
180 independent grounds, the fact that Closure fails on fallibilism does not constitute a  
181 disadvantage for the fallibilist.

182 The key question to ask here is what defeat cases teach about Closure. Brown  
183 thinks the answer is that Closure fails. However, an alternative is that the statement  
184 of Closure needs refinement. In particular, one might think that defeat cases can be  
185 dealt with by modifying Closure along like the following lines: if one knows  $p_1, \dots,$   
186  $p_n$ , if one competently deduces  $q$  from  $p_1, \dots, p_n$ , if on that basis one comes to  
187 believe  $q$ , and if one does not have any undefeated defeaters for believing  $q$  (based  
188 on this deduction), then one knows that  $q$ . We now have a version of Closure that  
189 avoids the problem of defeat cases, while preserving the intuition behind it as well  
190 as its explanatory power. At the same time, the problem of risk agglomeration for  
191 fallibilists remains. Pace Brown, new infallibilism can claim an advantage for their  
192 view vis-a-vis fallibilism after all.

193 6. Before closing, we'd like to take a brief look at Brown's discussion of defeat. In  
194 particular, we want to look at Brown's discussion of the defeat solution to the  
195 dogmatism paradox.

196

197 In a nutshell, the dogmatism paradox shows that Closure in conjunction with the  
 198 principle that one can justifiably disregard evidence one knows to be misleading  
 199 ('Disregard') entails that if one knows that  $p$ , then one can justifiably disregard any  
 200 evidence against  $p$  as misleading. One very elegant solution to the paradox appeals  
 201 to defeat. The key idea is that when one acquires evidence against  $p$ , this evidence  
 202 defeats one's knowledge that  $p$ . As a result, the problematic result cannot be derived  
 203 even if Closure and Disregard hold.

204 Unfortunately, as Maria Lasonen-Aarnio (2014) has forcefully argued, champi-  
 205 ons of the defeat solution face a residual puzzle. To see this, note that Disregard has  
 206 implications not only for outright belief but also for credences. That is to say, if I  
 207 know that a piece of the evidence against  $p$  is misleading, not only can I justifiably  
 208 disregard the evidence as it bears on my outright belief that  $p$  ('Disregard-B'), but  
 209 also as it bears on my credence in  $p$  ('Disregard-C'). And this, in turn, means not  
 210 only that I am not required to abandon my outright belief that  $p$ , but also that I am  
 211 not required to lower my credence in  $p$ . Now consider a 'no-defeat case' in which I  
 212 know that  $p$  and I receive some weak evidence against  $p$ , weak enough to not defeat  
 213 my knowledge that  $p$ . By Disregard-C, I am not required to lower my credence in  $p$ .  
 214 At the same time, the support that  $p$  receives from my total evidence once I acquired  
 215 the evidence against  $p$  is lower than it was before. In this way, Disregard-C licences  
 216 me to have a higher credence in  $p$  than my total evidence supports. And that can't be  
 217 right.

218 Brown's proposal is to hold on to Disregard-B and abandon Disregard-C. In fact,  
 219 it may be thought that this move has the additional benefit of offering an account of  
 220 how defeat works in both familiar instances of the dogmatism paradox and in no-  
 221 defeat cases. In familiar instances, the misleading evidence against  $p$  pushes my  
 222 total evidence for  $p$  below the threshold for knowledge that  $p$ . As a result, I no  
 223 longer know that  $p$ . The defeat solution can proceed as envisaged. In contrast, in no-  
 224 defeat cases, the misleading evidence against  $p$  reduces my total evidence for  $p$ .  
 225 This means that I need to lower my credence in  $p$ . At the same time, my total  
 226 evidence remains above the threshold for knowledge that  $p$ . As a result, I continue to  
 227 know that  $p$ .

228 While this account looks promising, there remains a fly in the ointment.  
 229 Disregard-C is quite plausible. In fact, it can be motivated in a parallel way to  
 230 Disregard-B (Lasonen-Aarnio, 2014). Both receive support from the fact that claims  
 231 like the following cannot be appropriately asserted:

- 232 (1)  $E$  is misleading evidence against  $p$ , but I should give up my belief that  $p$  as a  
 233 result of it.  
 234 (2)  $E$  is misleading evidence against  $p$ , but I should lower my credence in  $p$  as a  
 235 result of it.

236  
 237 If Disregard-B and C are true, this can be explained in a straightforward manner,  
 238 at least given that the popular knowledge norm of assertion also holds. To see this,  
 239 assume, for reductio, that I know (1)/(2). If so, since knowledge distributes across  
 240 conjunction, I know that  $e$  is misleading evidence against  $p$ . By Disregard-B/C, it  
 241 follows that it is not the case that I should give up my belief that  $p$ /lower my



242 credence in p. At the same time, if I know (1)/(2), since knowledge is also factive, it  
 243 follows that I should give up my belief that p/lower my credence in p. Since we have  
 244 derived a contradiction from our assumption, it follows that (1)/(2) cannot be  
 245 known. Finally, by the knowledge norm of assertion, one can appropriately assert  
 246 (1)/(2) only if one knows (1)/(2). It follows that (1)/(2) cannot be appropriately  
 247 asserted. In this way, champions of Disregard-B/C can offer an attractive account of  
 248 why (1)/(2) cannot be appropriately asserted. In this way, there is reason to think not  
 249 only that Disregard-C is true, but also that Disregard-B and C stand and fall  
 250 together. By the same token, the prospects for Brown’s attempt to endorse the  
 251 former and reject the latter look dim.

252 Brown offers two responses to this problem. The first is that ordinary folk might  
 253 not distinguish between belief and credence/Disregard-B and Disregard-C. As a  
 254 result, it’s not clear she is indeed committed to the claim that folk will judge that (2)  
 255 cannot be appropriately asserted. After all, what they may be latching on to is the  
 256 corresponding claim about belief, which Brown agrees to be true.

257 In response, consider: E is misleading evidence against p, but I should lower my  
 258 confidence in p as a result of it. Even if ordinary folk don’t distinguish between  
 259 belief and credence, it is less clear that they don’t distinguish between belief and  
 260 confidence. Even if they don’t, no matter whether ordinary folk would judge (2)  
 261 appropriately assertable, we (professional philosophers) would be committed to  
 262 doing so and that is enough to generate the problem for Brown.

263 Perhaps the second response fares better. To get it into sharp relief, note first that  
 264 misleading evidence is defined, roughly, as evidence against a truth. However,  
 265 Brown notes that there is an alternative use of ‘misleading’, according to which,  
 266 roughly, if something is misleading evidence, then we shouldn’t follow its lead.  
 267 Defeatists who deny Disregard-C will of course deny that this is a correct use of  
 268 ‘misleading’. This is because they will deny that if a piece of evidence is  
 269 misleading, then we shouldn’t follow its lead. By the same token, they may hope to  
 270 explain why (2) appears unassertable in terms of a widespread but incorrect use of  
 271 ‘misleading’.

272 To assess the merits of this response, note first that there are many things that can  
 273 be misleading, besides evidence. Brown herself mentions signals, maps, and people.  
 274 In addition, it may be worth noting that questions can be misleading, advice can be  
 275 misleading, instructions can be misleading, and so on. With these points in play  
 276 consider: If I know that X is misleading, then I shouldn’t follow X’s lead (‘Don’t  
 277 Follow’). Note that Don’t Follow can be motivated in exactly the same way as  
 278 Disregard-B and C. Statements of the form ‘X is misleading, but I should follow X’s  
 279 lead’ cannot be appropriately asserted. If the general principle holds, we can explain  
 280 this easily, along by now familiar lines invoking the knowledge norm of assertion.

281 **AQ3** Next, let’s ask why this principle should hold. To answer it, consider first  
 282 statements of the form ‘p but I don’t know that p’. These statements cannot be  
 283 appropriately asserted. In addition, they sound paradoxical. Likewise, statements of  
 284 the form ‘X is misleading, but I should follow X’s lead’ not only cannot be  
 285 appropriately asserted but also sound paradoxical. Consider next, statements of the  
 286 form ‘p but they don’t know that p’. These statements don’t sound paradoxical and  
 287 can be appropriately asserted. This strongly suggests that the reason why ‘p but I





288 don't know that p' sounds paradoxical is not semantic. But now note that statements  
 289 of the form 'X is misleading, but they should follow X's lead' are no better than 'X  
 290 is misleading, but I should follow its lead'. Even if this doesn't entail that the reason  
 291 why these statements sound paradoxical is semantic, at the very least, the hypothesis  
 292 that it is truth about the meaning of 'misleading' that is at work here provides an  
 293 attractive explanation of this datum. In particular, the hypothesis that it is true in  
 294 virtue of the meaning of 'misleading' that if something is misleading, then one  
 295 should follow its lead will do the trick here. And, of course, this is bad news for  
 296 Brown. After all, we now have reason to think that the use of 'misleading' that she  
 297 claims is incorrect actually captures a truth about the meaning of 'misleading'.

298 Of course, Brown may insist that Disregard-C is false and that, as a result, Don't  
 299 Follow is false also. But notice that Brown's reasons for this are (1) specific to  
 300 Disregard-C and (2) are entirely theoretical. More specifically, they have to do  
 301 entirely with preserving a certain response to the residual puzzle for champions of  
 302 the defeat solution to the dogmatism puzzle. And while we might concede that this  
 303 theoretical reason may be enough if our only concern is with Disregard-C, it seems  
 304 quite implausible to us that the same holds once it is clear that Don't Follow is at  
 305 stake also. The theoretical cost of abandoning a well-motivated general principle  
 306 just seems too high.

307

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