

Evidence of evidence is not (necessarily) evidence

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1. Feldman's initial rendition of "evidence of evidence is evidence"

In this note, I will be discussing a few renditions of a principle about evidence that was proposed by Richard Feldman (2007). The slogan for Feldman's principle is "evidence of evidence is evidence".² I begin with the following initial (*naïve*) rendition of Feldman's principle.

(EEE₁) If E (non-conclusively³) supports the claim that (some subject) S possesses evidence which supports p , then E supports p .

This naïve rendition of Feldman's slogan is refuted by the following counterexample. A card c is going to be sampled at random from a standard deck. Consider the following claims about c :

- (E_1) c is a black card.
- (E_2) c is the ace of spades.
- (p) c is an ace.

Now, suppose that John knows exactly which card c is. And, suppose that what we've been told so far about the case is *everything* we know about the case. Then, plausibly, the following is true:

- (1) E_1 supports the claim that John possesses evidence (E_2) which supports p .

Specifically, given the setup of the case, it seems clear that E_1 supports the claim that John *knows* E_2 . Why? Here, I am presupposing the following principle concerning *evidential support*:

- (2) E (*evidentially*) supports p iff E raises the (*epistemic*) probability of p .

Given the setup of the case, E_1 raises the (epistemic) probability that John knows E_2 . So, assuming (2) is correct, E_1 supports the claim that John knows E_2 . Thus, in this sense, it is clear E_1 supports the claim that John possesses evidence — namely, E_2 — that supports (indeed, *entails*⁴) p . However, assuming (2), E_1 *itself* does *not* support p , since E_1 is (*epistemically*) *probabilistically irrelevant* to p . Thus, we have a counterexample to (EEE₁), assuming principle (2).

In the next section, I will consider some alternative renditions of Feldman's "evidence of evidence is evidence" principle, and I will argue that these revisions of Feldman's principle are also untrue [assuming (2)].

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² Feldman (2007) actually articulates a slogan closer to "evidence that there is evidence for p is evidence for p ". My (EEE₁) — and the two other "(EEE)-principles" that I discuss below — deviate somewhat from that slogan. But, my renditions are closer to the sorts of principles Feldman (2007) actually *applies*.

³ We're only interested in cases where E provides *non-conclusive* evidential support. Of course, if E is *conclusive* evidence that there is *conclusive* evidence that p , then E will (plausibly) be *conclusive* evidence that p .

⁴ This reveals that on the (2)-conception of "support" E_2 can be *conclusive* (so long as E_1 is *non-conclusive*) in (EEE₁), without ruling-out counterexamples to the principle (see *fn.* 3).

2. Some revisions of “evidence of evidence is evidence”

Our counterexample to (EEE₁) immediately suggests the following simple revision:

(EEE₂) If E_1 supports the claim that S possesses evidence E_2 which supports p , then *the conjunction* E_1 & E_2 supports p .

Our counterexample to (EEE₁) will not suit as a counterexample to (EEE₂), since the conjunction E_1 & E_2 in our example *entails* p (and so *does* support p). But, other examples will suffice to refute (EEE₂). For instance, consider the following claims about a man named Joe:

- (E_1) Joe has a full head of white hair.
- (E_2) Joe is over 35 years of age.
- (p) Joe is bald.

This time, suppose that John knows exactly how old Joe is. And, suppose what I’ve said so far about the case is *everything* we know about the case. Then, the following claim seems plausible:

(3) E_1 supports the claim that John possesses evidence (E_2) which supports p .

Why? Well, it seems plausible (making certain reasonable background assumptions about Joe) that, given that John knows how old Joe is, the fact that Joe has a full head of white hair raises the (epistemic) probability that John knows (E_2) Joe is over 35. And, plausibly, Joe’s being over 35 supports — in the (2)-sense — the claim that Joe is bald. [Or, at least, we can easily imagine an example in the vicinity that would fit this description.] However, it is quite clear that the *conjunction* E_1 & E_2 does *not* support p (in *any* sense, because E_1 & E_2 *refutes* p). Thus, we (plausibly) have described a counterexample to (EEE₂), assuming principle (2).

More recently, Feldman (2011) has proposed the following alternative revision of his initial “evidence of evidence is evidence” principle:

(EEE₃) If S_1 possesses evidence (E_1) which supports the claim that S_2 possesses evidence (E_2) which supports p , then S_1 possesses evidence (E_3) which supports p .

This principle is distinct from principles (EEE₁) and (EEE₂), because — unlike (EEE₁) and (EEE₂) — (EEE₃) does *not* imply that the evidence S_1 possesses (E_1) which supports the claim that S_2 possesses evidence (E_2) which supports p must be *entailed by* (*viz.*, *be part of the content of*) the evidence S_1 possesses (E_3) which supports p . For this reason, the above counterexamples to (EEE₁) and (EEE₂) will *not* (as they stand) suffice to refute (EEE₃). But, if we think a bit more about the sorts of counterexamples we’ve seen so far, we can (arguably) also find a way to refute (EEE₃). In fact, a slight modification of our original counterexample to (EEE₁) seems to do the trick.

We can refute (EEE₃) by bringing another subject (Jim) into our original counterexample to (EEE₁). Suppose that Jim knows that E_1 is true of the sampled card c . But, suppose that E_1 is *all* Jim knows about c (apart from Jim’s knowledge of the claim that *John* knows exactly which card c is). More precisely, suppose that Jim *reasonably disbelieves or suspends judgment on all claims about* c — apart from E_1 , the claim that *John* knows which card c is, and the logical consequences of these two claims about c . Then, it seems plausible that — despite the fact that Jim possesses evidence (E_1) which supports the claim that *John* possesses evidence (E_2) which supports p — *Jim does not possess any* evidence (E_3) which supports p .

At least, it seems that the onus is on the defender of (EEE₃) to tell us *which part* (E_3) of Jim’s evidence *does* support p . That is, the onus seems to be on the defender of (EEE₃) to tell us *which* E_3 is such that (i) Jim possesses E_3 as evidence, and (ii) E_3 supports p . After all, E_3 can’t be E_1 , since E_1 is *irrelevant* to p . Moreover, E_3 can’t be E_2 , since Jim *reasonably disbelieves or suspends judgment on*

E_2 .⁵ More generally, since I've setup the case in such a way that Jim reasonably disbelieves or suspends judgment on *all* claims about c , apart from E_1 , the claim that *John* knows which card c is, and the logical consequences of these two claims about c , it seems that *nothing p-supporting will be part of Jim's evidence*. Indeed, I think the reasonable conclusion to draw here is that *there is no such E_3 (or, at least, there need be no such E_3) in our revised first counterexample*.

I therefore conclude that Feldman's revised "evidence of evidence is evidence" principle (EEE₃) is also false, assuming principle (2) about the relationship between *evidential support* and (epistemic) *probabilistic relevance*. Therefore, to the extent that (EEE₃) is the state-of-the-art, the title of this note seems to be justified — at least on one very natural reading of "evidence".⁶

References

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⁵ I presume here that if S reasonably disbelieves or suspends judgment on X , then X is *not* part of S 's evidence. But, this seems uncontroversial. At least, this seems to be something Feldman (1988, 2007) would accept.

⁶ One might complain about our counterexamples to (EEE₁)–(EEE₃) on the grounds that they presuppose a *probabilistic relevance* notion of evidential support. It is well known that such relations are *intransitive*, that they do not transmit through entailments, etc. (Salmon 1975), and this is (ultimately) what makes our counterexamples to Feldman's principles tick. Thus, one might try to save (EEE) by wheeling-in a different (more substantive) notion of "evidential support". Unfortunately, I don't have the space here to continue this important line of investigation. In a longer study (Fitelson 2011), I argue that — while appealing to a more substantive notion of "support" (e.g., propositional justification) can lead to more plausible (EEE) principles — it will not, ultimately, save (EEE).