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### Contact address:

Institutul de Cercetări  
Economice și Sociale „Gh.Zane”

Iași, str.T.Codrescu, nr.2, cod 700481

Tel/Fax: 004 0332 408922

Email: logosandepisteme@yahoo.com

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## **RESEARCH ARTICLES**



# EXCUSING PROSPECTIVE AGENTS

Cameron BOULT

**ABSTRACT:** Blameless norm violation in young children is an underexplored phenomenon in epistemology. An understanding of it is important for accounting for the full range of normative standings at issue in debates about epistemic norms, and the internalism-externalism debate generally. More specifically, it is important for proponents of factive epistemic norms. I examine this phenomenon and put forward a positive proposal. I claim that we should think of the normative dimension of certain actions and attitudes of young children in terms of a kind of “prospective agency.” I argue that the most sophisticated account of exculpatory defenses in epistemology – due to Clayton Littlejohn – does not provide an adequate model for exculpatory defenses of prospective agents. The aim is not primarily to challenge Littlejohn. Rather, I engage with his framework as a way of setting up my positive proposal. I call it the “heuristic model.”

**KEYWORDS:** justifications, excuses, New Evil Demon, epistemic norms

## Introduction

Blameless norm violation is a central topic in debates about the norm of belief, assertion, and practical reasoning. Proponents of factive norms of belief, assertion, and practical reasoning are particularly interested in blameless norm violation because there are many interesting cases in which agents violate putative factive norms but are clearly blameless.<sup>1</sup> An adequate account of such cases is important for challenging more traditional approaches to epistemic justification – for example, approaches that *equate* justification with a kind of blamelessness.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most popular strategy in this respect is to draw a distinction between

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<sup>1</sup> When I speak of “factive epistemic norms” I have in mind any combination of the so-called knowledge or truth norms of belief, assertion, or practical reasoning. In the interest of taking a straightforward approach to a general issue, I think certain details about differences between these norms can be set to one side. However, for those who find this objectionable, my claims about “factive epistemic norms” can be read as pertaining only to the knowledge norm of belief.

<sup>2</sup> See William Alston, “The Deontological Conception of Justification,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988): 257-299, Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), and Matthias Steup, “A Defense of Internalism,” in *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings, 2nd Edition*, ed. L. Pojman (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999).

justifications and excuses, and to explain various norm-violating agents' lack of justification in terms of excuses.

One source of complexity for this project is the sheer variety of cases of epistemic blamelessness. Consider a few familiar ones:<sup>3</sup>

- The New Evil Demon victim.
- The Gettiered person.
- The person who is just unlucky.
- The member of a benighted community.
- The brainwashed person.
- The stroke victim.

Some authors have argued that we cannot appeal to excuses to make sense of the blamelessness of agents in *all* types of cases.<sup>4</sup> Whatever story we want to tell about what it takes to deserve an excuse in a given situation, it will not apply across the board in a unified or non ad hoc way. This might be plausible. But a couple of things should be said regardless. First, in addition to excuses, there are other types of exculpatory defenses. For example, recent work on the topic focuses on “exemptions” in addition to excuses. Second, this recent work aims to understand excuses and their relationship to exemptions in a principled way, such that a unified account of the above cases looks hopeful.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I examine an additional kind of case: blameless norm violation in young children. This phenomenon has not been examined in much detail in epistemology.<sup>6</sup> But it is significant in the present context. As I will explain, it is not clear that excuses *or* exemptions provide appropriate explanations of blameless violations of factive norms in this kind of case. To put it very briefly: excuses imply too much responsibility, while exemptions imply too little. Insofar as we are interested in defending factive epistemic norms, we need a more nuanced account

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<sup>3</sup> I will fill out the details of the cases that need filling out in the next section. For now, I rely on the reader's familiarity.

<sup>4</sup> Mikkel Gerken, “Warrant and Action,” *Synthese* 178 (2011): 529-547.

<sup>5</sup> Clayton Littlejohn, “A Plea for Epistemic Excuses,” in *The New Evil Demon*, eds. F. Dorsch and J. Dutant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> One exception is Gerken, “Warrant and Action,” in which he challenges Keith DeRose's appeal to “secondary propriety” in defense of the knowledge norm of assertion, in “Assertion, Knowledge, and Context,” *Philosophical Review* 111 (2002): 167-203. Gerken does not examine blameless norm violation in small children in detail. Rather, he is interested in this sort of case as a counterexample to DeRose.



of exculpatory defenses.<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I put forward a positive account of blameless norm violation in young children. I call it the “heuristic model.”

The basic idea behind the heuristic model is that excusing young children should be understood as part of more general familiar practice. This is the practice of treating young children like adults. Perhaps the simplest example of this is when we speak to young children in sophisticated vocabularies, knowing that they do not understand everything we say, or even very much of it. I will argue that doing so respects their “prospective agency.” It is a heuristic or method for training them into adult human agents. The idea behind the heuristic model is that appropriate exculpatory defenses of young children likewise respect their prospective agency.

### 1. Contrasting Cases

At one point, certain strong externalists – proponents of factive norms of belief, for example – responded to the New Evil Demon (NED) problem by arguing that, while the demon victim is not justified in believing that *p*, she is *blameless* for believing that *p*.<sup>8</sup> The aim is to account for what the victim does right, despite failing to comply with factive epistemic norms. One objection to the blamelessness maneuver is that it’s too coarse-grained.<sup>9</sup> There are different cases of blameless belief. Some of them have little in common with the NED case. For this reason, calling the demon victim blameless does not say enough. More specifically, it fails to provide an adequate account of what the victim does right which agents in the other cases clearly do not. To illustrate, consider a couple of cases from the list above in more detail:

- **NED:** Dave is the victim of an evil demon who ensures that every empirical belief Dave forms is false, no matter how much evidence he has. Dave is the internal duplicate of an ordinary, epistemically blameless person. He continues to believe he has hands because it looks to him just like he has hands.

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<sup>7</sup> This paper simply assumes for sake of argument that at least some form of factive epistemic norm is plausible, or worth defending.

<sup>8</sup> Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For the classic discussion of the NED problem, see Stewart Cohen, “Justification and Truth,” *Philosophical Studies* 46 (1984): 279-295.

<sup>9</sup> Declan Smithies, “Epistemological Disjunctivism,” review of *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, by Duncan Pritchard (Oxford University Press, 2012), January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, and B.J.C Madison, “Epistemological Disjunctivism and the New Evil Demon,” *Acta Analytica* 29 (2014): 61-70.

- **STROKE:** Jim has recently suffered a severe stroke. His motor and cognitive skills have been severely impaired. In particular, his perception of ordinary objects has become highly unreliable. Whenever he is presented with a cup of coffee he mistakenly believes that it is bowl of soup.

Dave and Jim each violate factive norms of belief. So, according to proponents of factive norms of belief, they are not justified. But it seems they are blameless for believing what they do. It also seems clear that they are blameless in different ways. For that reason we need to say more about each case.

## 2. Justifications, Excuses, and Exemptions

In perhaps the most sophisticated available account of exculpatory defenses in epistemology, Clayton Littlejohn draws on Peter Strawson's<sup>10</sup> "trichotomous scheme." The basic idea is that there are three ways we ordinarily exculpate people:

- *Justifications:* We show that the agent has a sufficient reason for  $\phi$ -ing.
- *Excuses:* We show that, while the agent does *not* have sufficient reason for  $\phi$ -ing, they manifest a kind of rational excellence, or a kind of right concern for the relevant reasons, in  $\phi$ -ing.
- *Exemptions:* We show that, while the agent does *not* have sufficient reason for  $\phi$ -ing, the agent stands outside the realm of accountability in a general sort of way.

The basic difference between excuses and exemptions comes down to the capacities or excellences which excused agents manifest, and which exempt agents do not (indeed, cannot). It is crucial to note that explaining the appropriateness of excuse defenses in terms of rational excellence – or in other words, in terms of the agent's doing something commendable and positive – enables Littlejohn to respond to the worry that mere appeals to blamelessness do not do justice to what the NED victim does right, or well. By linking excuses to a kind of rational excellence, Littlejohn shows us how this sort of objection is misguided. Many of the commendable or positive things people feel inclined to say about NED victims are exactly the sort of thing Littlejohn claims explains why agents deserve an excuse (as opposed to an exemption, or a justification). As he puts it: "rationality is quite often a sign of *excuse*, not justification."<sup>11</sup> This feature of Littlejohn's approach will be important below.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1952): 1-25.

<sup>11</sup> Littlejohn, "A Plea for Epistemic Excuses," 21.

For now, note that with the trichotomous scheme in mind, it looks like we can handle the variety of cases on the table. For example, it is natural to understand Dave as excused according to this way of thinking about excuses, and it is natural to understand Jim as exempt. Moreover, it seems we thereby account for these cases in a unified way. We exploit the relationship between two forms of exculpatory defenses familiar from ordinary life. As such, the framework provides a more fine-grained way of dealing with the NED problem.

### 3. The Case of Young Children

In this section I present another type of case and explain why I don't think we should understand it in terms of justifications, excuses, *or* exemptions. Consider the following:

- **JUNIOR:** Junior is a child of around 3 years old.<sup>12</sup> He looks at a basket where the apples are usually kept and sees what happens to be a very convincing fake apple. He forms the belief that there is an apple in the basket. There are no apples in the basket.

Junior violates factive norms of belief. So, according to proponents of factive norms of belief Junior is not justified in believing that there is an apple in the basket. But it is clear that he is blameless for believing that there is an apple in the basket. How, more specifically, should we understand Junior's blamelessness? Is Junior exempt from the realm of accountability in a general sort of way? Does Junior have an excuse for believing that there is an apple in the basket? Let me explain why I think neither of these exculpatory defenses appropriately applies to Junior.

Firstly, it is implausible that Junior deserves an exemption. The point can be made in terms of training. Because the epistemic community has an interest in training Junior to be a dependable member – a provider of actionable information, for example – it is implausible to employ the concept of an exemption to explain Junior's blamelessness. This is because doing so is at odds with Junior's *prospects* as an epistemic agent. The notion of exemption places agents outside the realm of accountability in a general, or global sort of way. Were Junior's trainers to think of him as exempt, it would be difficult to make sense of their motivation to train him.

More controversial is the idea that Junior does not deserve an excuse. But recall that, in contrast with exemptions, excuses are often appropriate when

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<sup>12</sup> There is a lot to consider in terms of exactly how young Junior needs to be. I am bracketing these details for the sake of getting a very general idea across.

agents manifest a kind of excellence in their rational capacities. That is, excuses are often appropriate when the agent manifests the right kind of concern for the relevant sorts of reasons. To be sure, it seems true that small children have at least some kind of rational capacity, and that Junior manifests this capacity when he forms the belief that there is an apple in the basket. Moreover, it can sound natural to say that a young child, in a given circumstance, “deserves an excuse” (even epistemically speaking). However, if we keep in mind Littlejohn’s restricted understanding of the connection between excuses and rational excellence, it is not obvious that excuses are the appropriate notion to appeal to in order to explain blameless norm violation in young children. Again, the point can be put in terms of training. Junior is still in the process of becoming an epistemically responsible agent. If Junior is fortunate enough to belong to an epistemically responsible community, his parents or guardians or teachers will be in the process of epistemically training Junior. They will be in the process of inculcating the habits characteristic of responsible inquiry, for example. In other words, when Junior goes wrong in a blameless way, there is an awkward tension involved in explaining this in terms of excuse. More precisely, there is a tension in explaining this with the restricted notion used to defend strong forms of externalism about epistemic justification (in the context of the NED problem, for example).

It may be tempting, then, to suggest that this simply problematizes the restricted notion of excuse. However, it is worth pointing out a couple of things in response. Firstly, the role that the restricted notion plays in recent defenses of strong forms of externalism should not be underestimated. For many, it is a linchpin in the approach to dealing with more traditional worries about blameless norm violation.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, at least one way of appealing to a *less* restricted notion of excuse won’t help with this case, either. What I have in mind is the following. Perhaps Junior deserves an excuse for believing that there is an apple in the basket *because* he is a child. The idea might be that he is excused for violating the norm of belief in this case, not because he manifests some kind of rational excellence, but rather because, as a child, laxer standards determine whether he is blameworthy for doing so. It may sound natural, but this idea is misleading for a couple of reasons. First, and most importantly, it misses the point of the case. The case is designed such that even an adult would be blameless for thinking there is

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<sup>13</sup> Littlejohn, “A Plea for Epistemic Excuses,” and Timothy Williamson, “Justifications, Excuses, and Sceptical Scenarios,” in *The New Evil Demon*, eds. Fabian Dorsch and Julien Dutant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). For a different, but very closely related idea, see Duncan Pritchard, “Shadowlands,” in *The New Evil Demon*, eds. Fabian Dorsch and Julien Dutant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

an apple in the basket. Second, it would be a mistake to excuse Junior by appealing to the fact that he is a child because this undermines the idea that he needs an excuse in the first place. It effectively explains his blamelessness in terms of a lack of responsibility. This strikes me as equivalent to *exempting* Junior. And we have already seen why that is inappropriate.

#### 4. Prospective Agency and The Heuristic Model

Regardless of whether or not there is some sense in which it is correct to *excuse* Junior, a more nuanced account of exculpatory defenses of young children is in order. That is to say, we need an account that differentiates Junior's blamelessness from, say, Jim's blamelessness in STROKE and Dave's blamelessness in NED. It does not really matter for my purposes whether what follows is about a particular kind of excuse, or some other normative notion altogether. Whatever we call it, what matters is that the terms in our theory capture the full range of normative phenomena.

How should we understand Junior's blamelessness? I suggest that we draw on a familiar practice. To wit, we often treat small children as though they are adults. Perhaps the clearest example of this is when we talk to them in full-blown vocabularies, even when we know they do not understand everything we say. There are other intuitive examples, such as when we take children to places and events they couldn't possibly understand (like museums, or concerts). This practice extends to punishment, which in turn interacts in interesting and complex ways with blame-responses. We punish young children, but we do not hold them morally responsible (at least not in the way we hold adults responsible). Importantly, however, the punishment of young children is not simply a kind of Pavlovian conditioning. It has genuine moral significance. Indeed, I suggest that one way of thinking about the relationship between punishment and blame-responses towards young children is the following. We treat young children as "prospective agents." We hold them responsible as a kind of heuristic or method aimed at turning them into adult moral agents. I won't defend the empirical adequacy of this claim. I think it is a familiar enough idea for present purposes. My aim is to put it on the table as a way of thinking about our issue in epistemology.

The idea is that we can extend this understanding of the relationship between punishment and moral blame-responses: young children are also prospective *epistemic* agents. We hold them epistemically responsible as a kind of heuristic or method aimed at turning them into adult human epistemic agents. What is important for present purposes is that the concept of an epistemic excuse

(in its useful restricted sense) does not appropriately apply to young children in this picture. This is because excuses (in the useful restricted sense) apply to agents who violate norms but nevertheless manifest a kind of rational excellence that prospective agents do not have. So, to fit with our modified notion of responsibility, we need a modified exculpatory concept. We need the heuristic model of exculpatory defense. To put it one way, we can understand blameless epistemic norm violation in small children in terms of the notion of a “proto-excuse.”<sup>14</sup> To return to JUNIOR, the basic idea is this. When Junior mistakenly believes that there is an apple in the basket, he violates factive norms of belief. According to supporters of factive norms, he is not justified in believing that there is an apple in the basket. But Junior is blameless. He deserves a proto-excuse. This is *not* something that Junior enjoys in virtue of manifesting any sort of full-blown rational excellence; nor does it place him outside of the realm of accountability altogether. It is a kind of exculpatory defense that reflects the practice of treating Junior as prospective agent.

It may look like I am splitting hairs. So let me emphasize why this issue is important. For starters, there is potential here to make trouble for Littlejohn. And since his theory of epistemic excuses is the most sophisticated one on the market, that is already interesting. But the potential issue for Littlejohn is of secondary importance. Part of the reason for this is that it is not clear to me whether my proposal is in tension with Littlejohn’s framework. Indeed, if there is a dispute between us, it may be terminological; or perhaps the heuristic model simply compliments Littlejohn’s framework. Taking the latter approach, we might add to his framework in the following sort of way. We can list our categories of exculpatory defenses in a kind of descending order, where justifications imply the most robust type of blamelessness – a type that implies the fullest sort of responsible action/attitude – and exemptions imply the least robust type of blamelessness – a type that implies the thinnest sort of responsible action/attitude (indeed, the kind that is *merely* blameless).

- Justifications
- Excuses

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<sup>14</sup> I am not sure what the ordinary language term for the phenomenon I am targeting is. It seems likely to me that it’s simply “excuse.” This is fine for present purposes. It is widely acknowledged that excuses are a highly heterogeneous normative category (and thus “excuse” may even have a different meaning in different contexts). The name “proto-excuse,” on the present proposal, can simply be understood as a way of marking, for theoretical purposes, an important difference in kind between the restricted notion that, say, strong externalists are interested in, and what should be granted to Junior.

- Proto-excuses
- Exemptions

In any case, what does matter, as I have suggested, is that our theory of exculpatory defenses accounts for the full-range of (relevant) normative phenomena. Whatever the best theory of exculpatory defenses in epistemology is, it should incorporate the heuristic model. An adequate understanding of blameless norm violation in young children ought to properly reflect our practice of treating young children as prospective agents.

Another point is the significance of young children in another debate. Recently, some writers<sup>15</sup> have pointed out that cases of knowledge by testimony in small children do not seem to involve the kind of *credit* that certain prominent theories require for knowledge – namely, reliabilist virtue epistemology.<sup>16</sup> In this context, the “special” case of young children has enormous consequences. Indeed, mainstream epistemology is just starting to scratch the surface of the epistemically interesting *social* side of knowledge and justification. For example, the point about small children in the testimony debate is really a point about the (admittedly controversial) notion of “knowledge transmission.”<sup>17</sup> If it occurs at all, knowledge transmission is an epistemically interesting phenomenon that extends beyond exchanges between adults and children. It seems to me that the case of young children in the present context is likewise just one example of a more general social-epistemic phenomenon. Prospective agency may be a pervasive, and perhaps even fluid or contextual phenomenon. For example, people recovering from serious cognitive impairments might be another important kind of case. If so, then prospective agency is a much wider phenomenon than I have space to explore here.

## Conclusion

I have focused on the case of blameless norm violation in young children and argued that it places important constraints on our understanding of exculpatory defenses in epistemology. In particular, I have argued that it sits uncomfortably between excuses and exemptions as these appear in the most sophisticated epistemological work on this subject. To return to my brief slogan: excuses imply

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<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Lackey, “Norms of Assertion,” *Noûs* 41 (2007): 594–626.

<sup>16</sup> John Greco, *Achieving Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Ernest Sosa, *Knowing Full Well* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> John Greco, “Testimonial Knowledge and the Flow of Information,” in *Epistemic Evaluation*, eds. David Henderson and John Greco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

too much responsibility, while exemptions imply too little. The heuristic model addresses this worry. I have left it open whether we should think of the foregoing as a problem for our most sophisticated understanding of exculpatory defenses in epistemology, or merely as a way of adding a further dimension to it. On a more general note, an exciting upshot has emerged. Getting clearer on blameless norm violation in young children forces us to get clearer on our understanding of the relationship between adults and children in epistemic communities, and the social nature of epistemic responsibility. And that is surely a project worth pursuing.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Harmen Ghijsen and Lani Watson for helpful discussion on earlier drafts of this paper.



# TRACKING INFERENCES IS NOT ENOUGH: THE GIVEN AS TIE-BREAKER

Marc CHAMPAGNE

**ABSTRACT:** Most inferentialists hope to bypass givenness by tracking the conditionals claimants are implicitly committed to. I argue that this approach is underdetermined because one can always construct parallel trees of conditionals. I illustrate this using the Müller-Lyer illusion and touching a table. In the former case, the lines are either even or uneven; in the latter case, a moving hand will either sweep through or be halted. For each possibility, we can rationally foresee consequents. However, I argue that, until and unless we benefit from what is given in experience, we cannot know whether to affirm the antecedents of those conditionals.

**KEYWORDS:** inferentialism, perception, empiricism, foundationalism, argumentation

## Introduction

Empiricism appeals heavily to observation(s), but this idea of letting knowledge rest on observation(s) is now widely regarded as a “myth.” The epithet “myth of the Given” was famously introduced by Wilfrid Sellars.<sup>1</sup> Sellars did not deny the existence of sensations as non-propositional deliverances of the senses. He did, however, argue that they cannot play the role of the given, for they are non-propositional and hence cannot serve as foundations for our knowledge. On this view, sensations *cause* but cannot *justify* beliefs. This view has since inspired a whole school of thought.<sup>2</sup> However, against the view and its school, I want to argue that sensations can *cause and justify* beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science: Volume 1*, eds. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), 253-329.

<sup>2</sup> See Chauncey Maher, *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy: Sellars, McDowell, Brandom* (New York: Routledge, 2012). There is even talk of “myths” in the plural, as in Carl B. Sachs, *Intentionality and the Myths of the Given: Between Pragmatism and Phenomenology* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014).

I am certainly not the first to say so.<sup>3</sup> But, the pro-Given position deserves a fresh round of exposure. As it happens, I think I have a few good arguments to offer. Since I do not want to veer into a literature review, let me jump right in with those arguments.

### Reasoning in the Dark

Consider the Müller-Lyer illusion. In this image, two lines of equal length are juxtaposed side by side for comparison. Located at the tips of each line are arrow heads, the pair of one line pointing inward, the other pointing outward. The net effect of this simple configuration is that, when seen, the lines appear to be of unequal lengths. The inward-pointing arrows (seemingly) elongate the line on which they are appended, while the outward-pointing ones (seemingly) compress theirs. Hence, despite being identical in length when measured with a ruler, a subject looking at these two lines will nevertheless experience them as being uneven.

A causal episode spawns an experience of uneven lines but, once that content is incorporated holistically within the rest of a subject's beliefs, the subject can no longer cite the experience in order to establish the merit of her claims. As John McDowell explains,

In the Müller-Lyer illusion, one's experience represents the two lines as being unequally long, but someone in the know will refrain from judging that that is how things are.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, looking at the situation from an epistemological perspective, we seem to have a clear-cut substantiation of the idea that appeals to "the given" are powerless. What really matters is inferential prowess in what Sellars called "the logical space of reasons."<sup>5</sup> In this space, "mere" looking is supposedly of no help.

As a means of illustrating why this inferentialist movement away from observational givenness is wrong, consider a subject who has no clue what the Müller-Lyer illusion is. She has no prior knowledge of this object, neither "by description" nor "by acquaintance." Let this subject sit alone in a quiet room equipped with an image-projector. The Müller-Lyer image is then displayed, with ample noise-free time for her to see what is before her. We now turn off the

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Richard Schantz, "The Role of Sensory Experience in Epistemic Justification: A Problem for Coherentism," *Erkenntnis* 50 (1999): 177-191.

<sup>4</sup> John H. McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Sellars, "Empiricism," section 36.

projector and close the lights in the room, such that she is immersed in total darkness. At this point, a voice explains to her the following argument:

- 1) The Müller-Lyer lines appear uneven
- 2) The Müller-Lyer lines are even
- 3) Illusions are not as they appear

Therefore,

- 4) The Müller-Lyer lines are an illusion

Suppose that, at the completion of this intellectual commerce, our subject becomes convinced that the lines were in fact even, despite what she saw. She has dispelled an illusion, and now endorses a truth. Is the experience which our subject enjoyed when the image was visible really impotent in the space of reasons?

Someone could say that, because premises 1 and 3 talk of appearances, they clearly play some role in the deliberations. Indeed, the best thinkers on the matter (e.g., Sellars, McDowell, and Brandom) each have a great deal to say about how appearances and thoughts and claims about appearances figure in justifying beliefs. As Brandom explains, Sellars held that, when one says that something merely “looks” a certain way, “one is not endorsing a claim, but *withholding* endorsement from one.”<sup>6</sup> I agree completely with this account. However, I think it overlooks something: we switch to a non-committal idiom only occasionally. We do not, for example, use it when describing a square as straight-edged. So, appearance talk is subject to conditions of application that sometimes make it normatively inappropriate. The point of my example about the argument in the dark is to show that inference alone cannot determine this appropriateness.

Of course, my experimental design presents the argument only once the image projector has been shut off, so in that sense it is trivially true that the exercise did not involve the image, which figures only *in absentia*. However, can one really conclude from this that the observational episode played *no* part in the conclusion which the argument ultimately recommends? I argue that both during and after the image-projection, givenness is crucial. So, to give my set-up a revealing twist, what if, instead of *showing* my subject that the lines appear uneven, I merely *told* her?

If one wants to persuade someone that the Müller-Lyer image is an illusion, then whatever shape the argument takes, one of the premises will have to be that “The Müller-Lyer lines appear uneven.” Yet, what would happen to that argument

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<sup>6</sup> Robert B. Brandom, *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 108.

if the lines appeared even? Reasoning alone might establish the formal validity of the inference presented in the darkness, but the only way for the subject to assess the soundness of the argument is for her to take advantage of the experiential deliverances which alone can establish whether the first premise is true. Indeed, it is by no means obvious to armchair reflection that tagging arrow-heads on a line lengthens or shortens that line. Hence, the merit of the inference as knowledge will remain undetermined – until and unless a subject sneaks a peak at some quality tenaciously asserting its own standing.

Note that, by design, I have not provided an illustration of the Müller-Lyer illusion. In so doing, I have positioned the reader in the equivalent of the dark room, but with no prior projection made. Let those who know *what* my argument is *about* determine for themselves to what extent their acquaintance contributes to their assessment of my reasons. Familiarity with the lexicon and grammar I have employed will not by itself allow one to determine whether appending pairs of arrow heads to a line shortens or lengthens that line. If someone unfamiliar with what I have said were to confidently judge my claims as right or wrong, her confidence would be mere chutzpah – a mock-judgement, we might say.

Part of what we do when we ask for and supply reasons is “make explicit” the inferences that we commit to in making a claim.<sup>7</sup> Now, the situation I am discussing is clear-cut: either the lines are even or they are not. So, in principle, we might be able to map out what a community *would* expect from an agent making either claim. If the lines are uneven, then were one to draw perpendicular lines at the ends of the longer arrow, those new lines should pass by the shorter arrow without touching it. If, on the contrary, the arrow lines are even, then perpendicular additions should touch both of their tips. Geometrical examples like these are homey, but a plethora of more inventive conditionals sprout from each possibility. For example, *if* the lines appear uneven, *then* a savvy marketer could add pointed tips to her products in order to affect consumer choices. I agree with the inferentialist that the ability to foresee conditionals like these is an important marker of semantic entitlement. Simply put, if you don’t know (at least some of) what is implicit in what you say, then you don’t know what you are saying. Or, to dress the same idea in fancier jargon,

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<sup>7</sup> Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[t]he capacity to use the underlying descriptive vocabulary can be straightforwardly (indeed, algorithmically) transformed into the capacity to use conditionals involving that vocabulary.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, I argue that all these conditionals will just sit there, unused, until and unless one is given an observational cause to either affirm or deny their antecedents. Otherwise, one has no way to figure out which of this double book-keeping is right or wrong.

The inferentialist might reply that conditionals can be endorsed without endorsing their antecedents. That is true. After all, I happen to assent to “If aliens visit the Earth, then we will need galactic ambassadors” without assenting to “Aliens visit the Earth.” Still, whenever I endorse a conditional, I make myself rationally open to a potential *modus ponens*. Inferentialism is at its best when it stresses how “[t]he responsibility one undertakes by applying a concept is a task responsibility: a commitment to *do* something.”<sup>9</sup> That said, the application of a concept draws on the hybrid faculty of judgment, so it cannot rely solely on an economy between general concepts to determine the appropriateness of a particular case.

A person can be credited with rationality for being able to list (some of) the inferences entailed by what she claims, but this ability and the ascription it licenses do nothing to establish whether a specific claim is true. Hence, I submit that the only way to break the stalemate between anticipated consequences is to *see* whether their antecedents should be affirmed. So long as arguments are truth-preserving, not truth-generating, stacking more inferences will not fix things.

Discovering how things actually are is an achievement. In the Müller-Lyer image, this achievement is quickly attained by a few diagrammatic manipulations (like dragging the lines so that they overlap, or adding perpendicular lines so that they intersect). But, to benefit from those manipulations, one must take stock of their outcome. The moral, then, is this: whether the lines indeed *appear* unequal is ascertained by looking, and whether they are *in fact* equal is also ascertained by looking. Either way, the claims and inferences are answerable to the experiential qualities before one.

It might be worth recalling that philosophers who reject the given do so, not in response to some tangible crisis, but on account of a technical let-down: it is not propositional, and therefore cannot enter into an argument. Arguments are

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<sup>8</sup> Robert B. Brandom, *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 191.

<sup>9</sup> Robert B. Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

important, but since they are truth-preserving and not truth-generating, they can accomplish only so much. I thus think that speculative misgivings about the given are misplaced. It seems wiser to say that

[t]he verbal argument is at most only stage setting; the heart of the drama is the invocation of experience and, indeed, the attempt to register accurately the felt force of relevant experience.<sup>10</sup>

Pursuing with this, all I can do by way of argument is doctor a balanced set of considerations and let one ascertain whether one's judgement about the even or uneven lines is supported by something inside or outside this article.

## Conclusion

I have argued that, because the given can cause and justify beliefs, tracking inferences is not enough. Since my point is a general one, I want to close by restating it using an ordinary experience.

Imagine that I propose to sweep my arm so that the path of my arm intersects with the position of a table. Will the table block me? Again, this is a clear-cut question with two possible outcomes. Suppose I make a commitment and verbally proclaim: "My arm will sweep right through the table." Am I right or wrong? One might answer that any sober adult who competently deploys words like "arm" and "table" ought to know that, when assembled in the proposition "My arm will sweep right through the table," those words yield a falsehood. Hence, because I speak a natural language, I have inherited a store of well-confirmed habits which allow me to fruitfully forecast eventual states of affairs solely on the basis of vocabulary and grammar (These forecasts can be expressed as conditionals. I ought to know, for instance, that if my arm is halted, then I will be prevented from using it to scratch my knee under the table, and so on). Still, call me incredulous, but I like to check up on conventional wisdom once in a while, to see whether those habits indeed track the occurrences they are supposed to. So, while I am a competent user of "arm" and "table," it is not irrational for me to *test* what happens when the objects of those sign-vehicles are joined in a relation matching a proposition.

The result of such an experiment is quickly revealed for all to see: my sweeping arm is halted by the table. Yet, those who try to replace the given by inferences must make a longer detour to justify this. I have argued that their project cannot succeed, because inferences always allow one to map out two (or more) mutually-exclusive detours. As a philosophy of language, tracking such

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<sup>10</sup> Vincent M. Colapietro, "Peirce Today," *Pragmatism Today* 1 (2010): 11.

inferential consequences constitutes a genuine achievement. But, as an epistemology, it amounts to little, unless we are given the means to judge which of the competing inferences have true conclusions. Givenness, whatever else it might be, is the tie-breaker.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I want to thank Robert Brandom, Henry Jackman, Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen, Erkki Kilpinen, Henrik Rydenfelt, Serge Robert, Claude Panaccio, Patrice Philie, and audience members at the Helsinki Metaphysical Club.





# IS THERE ROOM FOR JUSTIFIED BELIEFS WITHOUT EVIDENCE? A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF EPISTEMIC EVIDENTIALISM

Domingos FARIA

**ABSTRACT:** In the first section of this paper I present epistemic evidentialism and, in the following two sections, I discuss that view with counterexamples. I shall defend that adequately supporting evidence is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for epistemic justification. Although we need epistemic elements other than evidence in order to have epistemic justification, there can be no epistemically justified belief without evidence. However, there are other kinds of justification beyond the epistemic justification, such as prudential or moral justification; therefore, there is room for justified beliefs (in a prudential or moral sense) without evidence.

**KEYWORDS:** evidence, evidentialism, epistemic justification, justification without evidence

## Introduction

It is common to hold that beliefs need justification because, as Paul Moser says, “belief without any justification is blind, or at least unreasonable.”<sup>1</sup> But what is a justified or rational belief? It is often stated that a belief is justified or rational if and only if there is sufficient evidence to support that belief. But is this correct? Can a belief be rational or justified without any evidence? Is it possible that there are justified beliefs not adequately supported by evidence? In order to properly answer these issues, we need to examine carefully the view which holds that evidence is a necessary and sufficient condition for having an epistemically justified belief (that view is called ‘epistemic evidentialism’). We must survey to what extent this perspective is sound. So, in the first section of this paper I present epistemic evidentialism and, in the following two sections, I discuss that view with counterexamples. I shall defend that adequately supporting evidence is a

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Moser, *Empirical Justification* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), 1.

necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for epistemic justification. Although we need epistemic elements other than evidence in order to have epistemic justification, there can be no epistemically justified belief without evidence. However, there are other kinds of justification beyond the epistemic justification, such as prudential or moral justification; therefore, there is room for justified beliefs (in a prudential or moral sense) without evidence.

### 1. Epistemic Evidentialism: Justified Beliefs with Evidence

Evidentialism is the view that epistemic justification has to do with the evidence and with the quality of evidence that is supported by a person. If at time *t* a person *S* has evidence that better supports a belief *B* than its denial, then *B* is justified for *S*; for example, when *S* looks at a green field that is in front of him in normal circumstances of observation, then *S*'s belief that there is something green before him is a justified belief. By contrast, if it is the denial of *B* that is better supported by the evidence available to *S* at *t*, then disbelief in *B* is justified; for example, when *S* considers the belief that sugar is sour, *S*'s gustatory experience is evidence that makes disbelief in the sourness of sugar justified. However, if *S*'s evidence is counterbalanced, then *S*'s suspension of judgment is justified. Inspired by Feldman and Conee,<sup>2</sup> and Swinburne,<sup>3</sup> among others, we can formulate more precisely the main thesis of evidentialism in the following way:

(EJ) *B* is epistemically justified for *S* at *t* iff *S*'s evidence sufficiently supports *B* at *t*.

But (EJ) needs to be analyzed and clarified, namely: (i) what counts as *evidence*? (ii) What is it for *S* to *have* something as evidence? (iii) What is it for *S* to have something as *sufficient* evidence to support *B*? Maybe, in answering question (i), the most immediate response is to assert that "evidence" means "propositional evidence" or "inferential evidence," like the first writings of Plantinga<sup>4</sup> on the epistemology of religion seem to suggest. Thus, *S*'s belief *B* is justified iff *B* is supported by arguments or on the basis of other propositions. More precisely, *S*'s evidence *E* supports *B* iff *E* consists in other propositional

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<sup>2</sup> See Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, "Evidentialism," *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985): 15-34 and Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Swinburne, "Evidentialism," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Charles Taliaferro et al. (Lanham: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 681-688 and Richard Swinburne, "Evidence," in *Evidentialism and its Discontents*, ed. Trent Dougherty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 195-206.

<sup>4</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Noûs* 15 (1981): 41-51.

beliefs S has and B is supported deductively, inductively or abductively on the basis of E.

However, if we understand “evidence” in this way, then it might make sense to think that there are justified beliefs without evidence; for example, it is plausible to hold that my belief that I drank coffee today at breakfast is justified, but this belief which I hold is not based on propositional evidence. That is because when I hold this belief, I don’t usually make the following inference or argument: (first premise) I remember that I drank a coffee; (second premise) my memory is typically reliable; (conclusion) so, it is probable that I drank a coffee. Instead, this is a belief which I hold immediately, without any inference or on the base of any proposition. In the same way, I typically form justified perceptual beliefs, or justified testimonial beliefs, etc, without this type of propositional evidence. For that reason, if evidence is only propositional evidence, then I have justified beliefs without evidence.

Moreover, if we restrict evidence to propositional evidence and if a belief is justified just in case there is propositional or inferential evidence to support that belief, then we may fall into the problem of infinite regress of justification. For, if a belief B is justified just in case there is evidence for it, i.e., only if there is another propositional belief B\* that supports B, then we need also another belief B\*\* to support B\*, and another belief B\*\*\* to support B\*\*, and so on *ad infinitum*. Therefore, S’s belief is justified just in case S has an infinite number of justified beliefs. However, since S cannot have an infinite number of justified beliefs, because of the limited nature of human cognitive faculties, then it seems that S’s beliefs are never justified.

But, does it make sense to restrict evidence to propositional evidence? A lot of evidentialists claim that such a restriction is implausible and I tend to agree with them. They assert that not only propositions are the relevant sort of evidence, but also other mental states or non-doxastic states are. Nevertheless, what sorts of mental states or non-doxastic states also count as evidence? For example, Sosa holds that *experiences* count likewise as evidence;<sup>5</sup> i.e., S’s experiences can provide him with reasons to believe B. These *experiences* can justify beliefs that need not be based on other beliefs or propositional evidence. In other words, these beliefs justified by experiences are basic, because they need not be grounded by inferences, arguments, or propositional evidence. In the same way, Conee and Feldman reject a restricted view of evidence and they argue for an evidentialist thesis which includes feelings and experiences. For example, they say that “part of a person’s evidence that it is a warm day might be her feeling warm.

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<sup>5</sup> See Ernest Sosa, “The Foundations of Foundationalism,” *Noûs* 14 (1980): 547-565.

The feeling itself is part of her evidence.”<sup>6</sup> More recently they claim that “experiences can be evidence, and beliefs are only derivatively evidence (...) all ultimate evidence is experiential.”<sup>7</sup> Swinburne also agrees with this.<sup>8</sup> And Plantinga, including himself in the tradition of Thomas Reid, argues more recently that evidence needs not be merely propositional evidence but it can also be testimonial evidence, perceptual evidence, evidence of the senses, impulsional evidence (i.e., a felt inclination to accept something) or evidence of yet another sort<sup>9</sup>. For example, regarding perceptual beliefs, Plantinga holds that:

My perceptual beliefs are not ordinarily formed on the basis of *propositions about* my experience; nonetheless they are formed on the basis of my experience. You look out of the window: you are appeared to in a certain characteristic way; you find yourself with the belief that what you see is an expanse of green grass. You have *evidence* for this belief: the evidence of your senses. Your evidence is just this way of being appeared to; and you form the belief in question *on the basis of* this phenomenal imagery, this way of being appeared to.<sup>10</sup>

With this broader sense of evidence, the problems highlighted above seem to be dissolved. On the one hand, we can prevent the infinite regress of justification because we can have rightly or properly basic beliefs which are grounded noninferentially by experiences, without relying on other propositional beliefs or arguments in order to be justified. On the other hand, it allows, for example, that my belief that I drank coffee at breakfast is grounded by evidence (i.e. by experiential or impulsional evidence), although it is not grounded by propositional evidence. Thus, it seems that almost all of my justified beliefs are based on evidence: either noninferential evidence (such as being grounded by experiences) or inferential evidence (such as being grounded by other propositional beliefs). More rigorously, and inspired by Dougherty,<sup>11</sup> we can answer question (i) in the following way:

(E) S's evidence E can support B either inferentially or noninferentially:

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<sup>6</sup> Feldman and Conee, *Evidentialism*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, “Evidence,” in *Epistemology: New Essays*, ed. Quentin Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 87-88.

<sup>8</sup> See Swinburne, “Evidentialism,” 681.

<sup>9</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 185-193. If evidence is also “impulsional evidence” (or “felt attractiveness”), then we have evidence for simple mathematical or a priori beliefs.

<sup>10</sup> Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 98.

<sup>11</sup> See Trent Dougherty and Chris Tweedt, “Religious Epistemology,” *Philosophy Compass* 10/8 (2015): 557.

## Is There Room for Justified Beliefs without Evidence?

(I) E noninferentially supports B iff E is a non-doxastic experience, broadly construed, that S has and B is an epistemically fitting response to E.

(II) E inferentially supports B iff E consists of other justified beliefs S has and the content of E deductively, inductively, or abductively supports B's content.

After having clarified what evidence is,<sup>12</sup> we need to clarify what it is to *have* something as evidence. According to (EJ), only S's *own* evidence (her propositions or mental states) at t is relevant to S's being justified in believing B. But this raises some problems: does S's evidence at t include only what S actually *has currently* in mind or does it also *include everything stored* in S's mind and memory?

On the one hand, if we accept a liberal view in which what counts as evidence is everything that S has in his mind (even his deep memories of which he is now unaware), then it may happen that S is justified relative to some portion of his evidence but he is not justified relative to his total evidence (which includes long-term memories, etc). For example, suppose that we have the belief R1 that all journalists are reliable to report the news. We have justification to believe R1 because the news which we read or see from different sources seem similar. For instance, we always see that if we read in some newspaper that some important event happened, there is a strong probability that another newspaper reports the same event. But suppose further that ten years ago we heard a reliable person tell us that journalist X is always incompetent and writes fake news. So, ten years ago, we had the belief R2 that X is an unreliable journalist. However, now we are unable to bring to mind this belief R2 although it is stored deeply in our long-term memory. So, if now someone asks us whether or not X is a reliable journalist, the belief R1 which we have may give us a reason to believe R3: that X is a reliable journalist. But there is a problem: R3 is a belief that is justified for us in relation to current evidential belief R1; however R3 is not justified in relation to our total evidence (which includes memory beliefs, like R2). This is because the evidential belief R2, which is present in our long-term memories, defeats the evidential belief R1. Therefore, the belief R3 is not justified for us. But that consequence is

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<sup>12</sup> There are other relevant accounts of evidence, like the view of Williamson in which he argues that "knowledge, and only knowledge, constitutes evidence", wherein it is defended the «*Evidence = Knowledge thesis*». See Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 185. But this view of evidence seems too narrow and austere. For further discussion about this notion of evidence see Jim Joyce, "Williamson on Evidence and Knowledge," *Philosophical Books* 45 (2004): 296–305, or Anthony Brueckner "Knowledge, Evidence, and Skepticism According to Williamson," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 70 (2005): 436–443.

odd and counterintuitive once having beliefs like R3 seems reasonable. Hence, it seems that we need a better account of *having* evidence.

We may accept a more restrictive view in which what counts as evidence is just what S actually *has currently* in mind, such as Feldman argued in his first writings on this subject.<sup>13</sup> With this account the evidential belief R2 is irrelevant (because it is not evidence which we have currently and actually in mind) and, for that reason, we have justification to believe R3 based solely on our current evidential belief R1. Yet such account has its problems, namely it seems too restrictive. This is because when we are not presently thinking about the reliability of journalists or when we don't have current beliefs about it, the nonoccurrent belief R1 which is stored in our memory is not justified for us. However, this also seems counterintuitive. So, if it seems that some nonoccurrent beliefs are justified, we need a better approach of *having* evidence.

A better option to answer question (ii) seems to be a more moderate view, between those two extremes, as is advocated by Mittag<sup>14</sup> or by Feldman and Conee.<sup>15</sup> According to this moderate view, what counts as evidence is not merely what S actually *has currently* in mind but also some (though not all) nonoccurrent beliefs or mental states which S has. However, which, more specifically, nonoccurrent beliefs or mental states count as evidence for S? One plausible proposal is to claim that what counts as evidence are those nonoccurrent beliefs or mental states which are easily available to S upon reflection. Thereby, we are now justified in believing R3 iff our evidential belief R2 is not easily available to us upon reflection, but evidential belief R1 is easily available to us. It is true that the concept *easily available* is a bit vague, but this is not a sufficient reason to exclude this moderate approach to what having evidence amounts to. Even Feldman and Conee themselves acknowledge that it is difficult to offer a detailed account of having evidence; nonetheless they see no reason in this to give up the evidentialist theory of justification.

We have already taken a glimpse on what *evidence* is and what it is for S to *have* evidence. Now we need to clarify what it is for S to have something in the way of *sufficient* evidence. In a first attempt to understand this notion, one may be tempted to claim that some evidence E for B is sufficient iff E could convince any reasonable person that B is the case. But this criterion is too restrictive and

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<sup>13</sup> See Richard Feldman, "Having Evidence," in *Philosophical Analysis*, ed. David Austin (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 83-104.

<sup>14</sup> See Daniel Mittag, "Evidentialism," in *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Duncan Pritchard (London: Routledge, 2011), 197-186.

<sup>15</sup> See Feldman and Conee, "Evidence," 83-104.

leads to absurd consequences. For example, in many subjects it seems that we have justification to believe some proposition, yet we are unable to convince every reasonable person. This is very common in many philosophical, historical, scientific or political discussions. In this regard, Van Inwagen holds that we may have some evidence which is non communicable (or at least that we don't know how to communicate), like personal *insights* and, for that reason, we cannot convince everyone.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, we may have justification and sufficient evidence.

A more plausible account of how to answer question (iii) may be to understand sufficient evidence in terms of probabilities, as Swinburne seems to defend<sup>17</sup>. So, the evidence E *sufficiently* supports B iff B is made epistemically likely by E and E is *prima facie* absent of any defeaters. In other words, S is justified to believe B and, thus, S's evidence E sufficiently supports B iff the evidence E that S has makes it more probable that B is true rather than false, where the probability in question must be greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$ , and this evidence E is not defeated by counterevidence E\* which S has. However, if S *knows that* B, the degree of evidence must be greater than that required for mere *justification*. As Conee and Feldman hold,

a belief is well-enough justified for knowledge provided that the believer has strong evidence that supports it beyond all reasonable doubt. One has evidence that supports a proposition beyond all reasonable doubt just in case one has strong evidence in support of the proposition and no undefeated reason to doubt the proposition.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, Feldman also recognizes that an understanding of sufficient evidence merely in terms of probabilities is not enough, because this view seems to imply that if S's evidence E makes it probable that B, even when S does not understand either B or E, then S is justified to believe B.<sup>19</sup> That is, on this view, S is even justified to believe extremely complex beliefs that he is unable to understand. But if this consequence seems unacceptable to us, perhaps we may reformulate the notion as follows: evidence E provides sufficient evidence for S to

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<sup>16</sup> See Peter Van Inwagen, "It Is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything Upon Insufficient Evidence?" in *The Possibility of Resurrection and Other Essays in Christian Apologetics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 30.

<sup>17</sup> See Swinburne, "Evidentialism," 683 and Swinburne, "Evidence," 195.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, "Self-Profiles: Earl Conee and Richard Feldman," in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 123.

<sup>19</sup> See Richard Feldman, "Evidence," in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 350.

believe B iff E makes B probable, E is *prima facie* absent of any defeaters, and S *grasps* the connection between E and B. But even this formulation of the notion has its problems: it seems to over-intellectualize justification since, for example, children usually seem not to grasp such a connection between E and B. Thus, it is very difficult to give necessary and simultaneously sufficient conditions for having “sufficient evidence.” But I think that an understanding of this notion in terms of probabilities is at least a necessary condition.

Before discussing the necessary and sufficient conditions of (EJ), it is worth noting some brief motivation to hold (EJ). First of all, (EJ) is pre-theoretically plausible since when we think intuitively about what makes a belief justified for S, we assume that S must have adequate reasons to hold that belief and having adequate reasons is, after all, having sufficient evidence – for example, it seems intuitively plausible that if S has no reason or evidence to believe B (in other words, if B has no ground in S’s epistemic states), then B is not justified for S. Secondly, there is a strong and important tradition in the history of philosophy, in which (EJ) is defended. Philosophers like John Locke, David Hume, William Clifford, Bertrand Russell, Roderick Chisholm, among many others, have argued for (EJ). Thirdly, there are new arguments seeking to show that (EJ) is true, as those presented by Adler,<sup>20</sup> Shah,<sup>21</sup> and Dougherty.<sup>22</sup> However, my aim in this paper is not to look over these arguments or motivations, but only to discuss the necessary and sufficient conditions for (EJ).

## 2. Against the Sufficient Condition for (EJ): Evidence without Justification?

As we saw in the previous section, (EJ) holds that having sufficient evidence is a necessary and sufficient condition for epistemic justification. Is this correct? Can there be evidence without justification and, in turn, justification without evidence? To examine this, let’s start with some strong objections to the proposed sufficient condition. Claiming that evidence is not sufficient for epistemic justification is to hold that:

(EJ\*) S’s evidence sufficiently supports B at t, but B is not epistemically justified for S at t.

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<sup>20</sup> See Jonathan Adler, *Belief’s Own Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 31.

<sup>21</sup> See Nishi Shah, “A New Argument for Evidentialism,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 56 (2006): 481–498.

<sup>22</sup> See Trent Dougherty, introduction to *Evidentialism and its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.



A first challenge to (EJ), or defense of (EJ\*), is presented by Feldman with the following counterexample:

(Ex1) A professor and his wife are going to the movies to see *Star Wars, Episode 68*. The professor has in his hand today's newspaper, which contains the listing of movies at the theater and their times. He remembers that yesterday's paper said that *Star Wars, Episode 68* was showing at 8:00. Knowing that movies usually show at the same time each day, he believes that it is showing today at 8:00 as well. He does not look in today's paper. When they get to the theater, they discover that the movie started at 7:30. When they complain at the box office about the change, they are told that the correct time was listed in the newspaper today. The professor's wife says that he should have looked in today's paper and he was not justified in thinking it started at 8:00.<sup>23</sup>

With (Ex1) we see that the professor seems to have sufficient evidence to believe, when he was driving to the theater, that the movie starts at 8:00. This belief is based on his memory beliefs, namely his remembering that yesterday's newspaper reported that the movie was showing at 8:00 and that movies are commonly showed at the same time every day. So, if he has sufficient evidence, then he is justified in his belief. Nevertheless, (Ex1) shows that the professor's belief is not justified (since if he had looked for additional evidence, for example, if he had read today's newspaper, then he would find a defeater for his belief). Thus, (Ex1) seems to illustrate (EJ\*).

Is this a good objection to (EJ)? Maybe not. One possible reply to this objection is to include a search for defeaters in the notion of "sufficient evidence." So, in (Ex1) the professor does not have sufficient evidence for his belief because he could easily gather defeating evidence (if he had read today's newspaper). However, perhaps this notion would be far too demanding. So, another possible reply is to start with a question formulated by Feldman: "what should S believe now, given the situation he's actually in?" If we apply this question to (Ex1), it seems plausible to hold that the professor is in a situation (when he was driving to the theater) in which he is justified to believe that the movie starts at 8:00 and, in this situation, he also has good evidence for that belief. So, given the professor's actual situation, it is reasonable to believe what he believes. Thereby, (Ex1) does not seem to be a good counterexample to (EJ).

Another criticism of (EJ) is presented by Hilary Kornblith. He argues that it is not enough for a person to have evidence or sufficient evidence in order to be epistemically justified, but that it is also relevant how this evidence is gathered by

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Feldman, *Epistemology* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2003), 47.

that person. Namely, it is important to act in an epistemically responsible way in forming beliefs, where

epistemically responsible action is action guided by a desire to have true beliefs. The epistemically responsible agent will thus desire to have true beliefs and thus desire to have his beliefs produced by reliable processes.<sup>24</sup>

If a person neglects further evidence, or if she acquires evidence by dubious means, even in a situation in which she has a belief supported by sufficient evidence, it seems that her belief is not properly justified. Here is an example:

(Ex2) Jones is a headstrong young physicist, eager to hear the praise of his colleagues. After Jones reads a paper, a senior colleague presents an objection. Expecting praise and unable to tolerate criticism, Jones pays no attention to the objection; while the criticism is devastating, it fails to make any impact on Jones' beliefs because Jones has not even heard it. Jones' conduct is epistemically irresponsible; had Jones' action been guided by a desire to have true beliefs, he would have listened carefully to the objection. Since his continuing to believe the doctrines presented in his paper is due, in part, to this epistemically irresponsible act, his continued belief is unjustified.<sup>25</sup>

In this (Ex2), we can assert that Jones has sufficient evidence for his belief; however, his belief is not justified for him because he is neglecting important information and objections. In other words, he is culpable by failing to take into account relevant information and, for that reason, he has not performed an epistemically responsible action. So, evidence is insufficient for justification; more is required (beyond evidence) in order to have justification. But is this a good objection to (EJ)? Resorting to the question formulated by Feldman (what should S believe now, given the situation he's actually in?), we cannot say that Jones is justified in the same way as the professor in (Ex1). Because, given the situation in which Jones is actually in, Jones should listen to the criticism and the additional evidence presented by the senior colleague. So, there seems to be a disanalogy between (Ex2) and (Ex1).

Another interesting objection to (EJ) is presented by Plantinga. He concedes that evidence (in a broad sense) is necessary for justification or warrant. So, if a belief has justification or warrant, then that belief has sufficient evidence. However, he also argues that "no amount of evidence of this sort is by itself sufficient for warrant" or justification.<sup>26</sup> In other words, evidence is not a

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<sup>24</sup> Hilary Kornblith, "Justified Belief and Epistemically Responsible Action," *The Philosophical Review* 92 (1983): 47-48.

<sup>25</sup> Kornblith, "Justified Belief and Epistemically Responsible Action," 36.

<sup>26</sup> Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 192.

sufficient condition for justification. Plantinga's argument may be summarized as follows: suppose I see a tree; so, my inclination to believe that what I see is a tree together with my perceptual experience (my being appeared to treely) constitutes evidence for the belief that I see a tree. But suppose further that my perceptual faculties are not functioning in a proper way. For example, because of this malfunction I have often this perceptual experience of a tree even when there is no tree in the surroundings. For that reason, it seems that I am not justified in my belief that I see a tree since this belief is merely accidental. Thus, evidence is not enough for justification or warrant; we also need proper function or absence of cognitive pathology,<sup>27</sup> such as Plantinga maintains:

So the evidentialist is right: where there is warrant, there is evidence. Having this evidence, however, or having this evidence and forming belief on the basis of it, is not sufficient for warrant: proper function is also required. And given proper function, we also have evidence: impulsional evidence, to be sure, but also whatever sort is required, in the situation at hand, by design plan; and that will be the evidence that confers warrant.<sup>28</sup>

This thesis is also defended with another counterexample presented by Plantinga:

(Ex3) An aging forest ranger lives in a cottage in the mountains. There is a set of wind chimes hanging from the bough just outside the kitchen window; when these wind chimes sound, the ranger forms the belief that the wind is blowing. As he ages, his hearing (unbeknownst to him) deteriorates; he can no longer hear the chimes. He is also sometimes subject to small auditory hallucinations in which he is appeared to in that wind-chimes way; and occasionally these hallucinations occur when the wind is blowing.<sup>29</sup>

In this last case, it seems that the forest ranger has sufficient evidence (i.e. experiential auditory evidence) to support the belief that the wind is blowing. But, even so, this belief seems not to be justified or warranted for him, since his cognitive faculties are deteriorated and he has auditory hallucinations; in other words, his cognitive faculties are not functioning properly. And if a person's cognitive faculties are not functioning properly, the beliefs that person holds do not seem to be justified in the same way as when that person has properly

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<sup>27</sup> Plantinga is more interested with concept of *warrant* (that which makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belie) than that *justification*. But, we can also apply the proper function theory to concept of epistemic justification, like Michael Bergmann, *Justification without Awareness: A Defense of Epistemic Externalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 193.

<sup>29</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Proper Functionalism," in *The Continuum Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Andrew Cullison (London: Continuum, 2012), 125-126.

functioning cognitive faculties. So, my conclusion in this section is that (EJ\*) seems true; evidence is not sufficient for epistemic justification, at least it is not sufficient for an epistemic justification from an objective or third-person perspective. For that end, we need other epistemic elements (like epistemic responsibilism, reliabilism,<sup>30</sup> or proper functionalism) beyond evidence in order to have epistemic justification.

### 3. Against the Necessary Condition for (EJ): Justification without Evidence?

In the previous section I argued that evidence is not sufficient for epistemic justification. Now we need to ask whether evidence is necessary for justification. Maintaining that evidence is not necessary for epistemic justification is to hold that:

(EJ\*\*) B is epistemically justified for S at t, but it is not true that S's evidence sufficiently supports B at t.

Are there cases in which (EJ\*\*) is true? A first attempt to show this is to think about examples such as:

(Ex4) Suppose that Joseph formed a belief that Afonso Henriques was the first king of Portugal and he had good evidence for believing it (for example, he learned it at elementary school); thus, he was justified in believing that. However, after twenty years, Joseph has forgotten all of his evidence for that belief and he has not acquired any new evidence. Even so he continues to believe strongly and without hesitation that Afonso Henriques was the first king of Portugal. So, it seems that he is also now justified in having this belief; nevertheless, he has not any evidence for it now.

With (Ex4) we can see that the belief that Afonso Henriques was the first king of Portugal is an epistemically justified belief for Joseph at this moment, but he has not any evidence to support this belief at this moment (because he forgot about the evidence). But, is (Ex4) a good counterexample to (EJ)? There are some strategies to cope with this problem. For example, Alvin Goldman suggests that, to

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<sup>30</sup> Reliabilism and evidentialism are theories usually considered as being in conflict, but in the last years there are attempts to reconcile both theories. For example, Comesaña argues that to take care of Bonjour's clairvoyance objection to reliabilism, and the generality problem, we need to combine reliabilism with evidentialism; see Juan Comesaña, "Reliabilist Evidentialism," *Noûs* 44 (2010): 571-600. In the same way, Goldman argues that "perhaps an ideal theory would be a hybrid of the two, combining the best elements of each theory;" see Alvin Goldman, "Toward a Synthesis of Reliabilism and Evidentialism? Or: Evidentialism's Troubles, Reliabilism's Rescue Package," in *Evidentialism and its Discontents*, ed. Trent Dougherty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 254-280.

handle these cases, we need to abandon “the requirement that justifying evidence must be possessed at the same time as the belief” and, furthermore, we need “to add a rule or condition to mark preservative memory as a justification-transmitting feature” which are explained in terms of reliability; in this way “preservative memory is a cognitive belief-retaining process that is able to transmit justifiedness from an earlier to a later time.”<sup>31</sup> For that reason, Joseph is still *now* justified in believing that Afonso Henriques was the first king of Portugal although he has no evidence *now* for this belief (but he had *evidence at an earlier time*). So, evidentialism needs the help of reliabilism.

Nevertheless I think that we can handle this counterexample (Ex4) only with recourse to evidentialism. Resorting to Feldman’s argument, we can assert that Joseph is in a mental state that is evidence for his belief; namely, he now has a disposition to recollect that Afonso Henriques was the first king of Portugal and this disposition is the evidence for his belief. And, according to Feldman, “if this disposition to recollect is sufficiently strong and clear, then in the absence of defeaters, it is strong enough evidence for him to know” his belief.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Joseph now has evidence that provides justification for his belief. Furthermore, we can classify this evidence as *impulsional evidence*, i.e., a felt push or an inclination to accept a belief; in this case, a kind of disposition to accept the belief which is recollected from memory. Thus, (Ex4) is not a good counterexample to the necessary condition of (EJ), because the belief that Afonso Henriques was the first king of Portugal is an epistemically justified belief for Joseph and he has evidence (mainly impulsional evidence) for this belief.

A last sort of counterexample that it is worth looking at has the following form:

(Ex5) Joey Votto gets a hit about 1 out of every 3 times at bat. This is a great average in baseball, but the likelihood that he will get a hit in a particular time at bat is very low. You might initially think that it would be unreasonable for Votto to believe he will get a hit in a particular time at bat. However, suppose you learn that Votto recently read *The Power of Positive Thinking in Baseball* and discovered that batters who believe they are going to get a hit are statistically more likely to get a hit. You might think that it would be a good idea for Votto to try to think positively and believe that he will get a hit, despite the evidence to the contrary. Hence, you might conclude that belief is justified in this case, in spite of the evidence. (It’s important to note that the evidence about positive

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<sup>31</sup> Goldman, “Toward a Synthesis,” 261.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, “Response to Goldman,” in *Evidentialism and its Discontents*, ed. Trent Dougherty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 304.

thinking only shows that it makes it more likely that one will get a hit, not that it makes it more likely than not).<sup>33</sup>

Or, for example, suppose that a subject S has a severe disease, like a serious cancer; all evidence shows that almost no one recovers from this disease. However, even so, S does not want to give up his hope and he believes that he will recover soon. This optimistic belief helps him to have confidence, and having confidence tends to make slight improvements in one's health, even though almost nobody recovers from this disease. It seems that S is justified in believing that he will recover soon, despite his having insufficient evidence for that belief. With these two examples we see cases in which (EJ\*\*) seems to be true.

Analogously, William James argues that S can be justified in believing that B, even in when S does not have sufficient evidence for B<sup>34</sup>. Namely, this is what may happen when we are faced with a *living, forced, momentous option*. Some brief clarifications: (i) an *option* is a decision between two hypotheses and a *hypothesis* is what may be proposed to our belief; (ii) an *option is living* when both hypotheses are live and a *hypothesis is live* when it appears as real possibility for the person in question; (iii) an *option is forced* when there is no possibility of not choosing in that we are faced with a "dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction;" (iv) an *option is momentous* when the opportunity to choose between both hypotheses is unique, significant, irreversible; and (v) an option that is simultaneously living, forced, and momentous is called a *genuine option*. Based on these distinctions, James argues that if we are faced with a genuine option to believe a proposition "that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds," then we can be justified in believing that proposition without evidence. According to James this is what happens with the belief in God because this belief is intellectually undecidable and it is a genuine option; furthermore, if we believe in God and God exists, then we gain a certain vital good (which we would lose in a situation of non-belief). Thus, a person can be justified to believe in God without evidence.

Do all these examples amount to a good objection against the necessary condition for (EJ)? The answer is *no* if we draw a distinction between *epistemic justification* and *prudential* or *moral justification*. The point is that (EJ) is not the only kind of justification. Following Moser, while *epistemic justification* is related mainly to evidence, truth, knowledge, etc., *prudential* or *moral justification* is

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Feldman, "Evidentialism," in *The Continuum Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Andrew Cullison (London: Continuum, 2012), 97.

<sup>34</sup> William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Longmans, Green, and Company, 1896) 1-31.

more related with well-being or good practical consequences for a person.<sup>35</sup> In this last sense, a person may be justified to believe B even in a case in which B is not supported by evidence or in which B is obviously unlikely to be true. So, we can roughly say that:

(MJ) B is morally justified for S at t iff S's believing that B at t is probably more conducive to S's moral goodness than is S's denying that B and S's withholding that B.

(PJ) B is prudentially justified for S at t iff S's believing that B at t is probably more conducive to S's prudential well-being than is S's denying that B and S's withholding that B.

Let us survey the counterexamples to (EJ) again. On the one hand, considering (Ex5) in an epistemic sense, it is true that Votto shouldn't believe that he will get a hit since he does not have sufficient evidence for this belief and, therefore, Votto's belief is not justified. On the other hand, considering (Ex5) in a prudential or moral sense, Votto should believe that he will get a hit since he has a plausible practical reason for his belief and, thus, Votto's belief is justified. But when one intuitively asserts that in (Ex5) Votto's belief is justified, it is only so in this last sense of prudential or moral justification. So, example (Ex5) is not an instance of (EJ) but rather of (MJ) or (PJ); the justification in question is not epistemic but instead prudential or moral. Hence, (Ex5) is not indeed a counterexample to the necessary condition for (EJ).

Something similar happens with the example in which a person has a severe disease and believes in his quick recovery. We can say that his belief is justified, not in an epistemic sense, but in a prudential sense. Furthermore, it is plausible to assert that his prudential considerations with regard to his belief outweigh any other epistemic consideration. So, even though his evidence does not support the belief that he will recover soon and, thereby, this belief cannot be epistemically justified for him, it may be even more rational for this diseased person to believe in his recovery than not to believe it. Therefore, all things considered, he is justified or rational in believing in his quick recovery. Likewise, James' argument for a justified belief in God without evidence is not a counterexample to (EJ), because if James' argument is a successful argument, this argument is about (MJ) or (PJ) and not an instance of (EJ). In this regard, it is worth to quote Feldman and Conee:

It is possible that there are circumstances in which moral, or prudential, factors favor believing a proposition for which one has little or no evidence. In that case,

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<sup>35</sup> See Moser, *Empirical Justification*, chapter VI.

the moral or prudential evaluation of believing might diverge from the epistemic evaluation indicated by evidentialism. It is consistent with our version of evidentialism that there are aspects of life in which one is better off not being guided by evidence. Thus, to take the obvious example, it is consistent with evidentialism that people are better off taking their religious beliefs on faith (rather than letting their beliefs on religious matters be guided by their evidence). Of course, if those beliefs are unsupported by evidence, then evidentialism implies that these beliefs are not epistemically justified. They may nevertheless retain whatever other non-epistemic virtues their defenders claim for them.<sup>36</sup>

So, there is room for beliefs, and for justified beliefs, without evidence but only with respect to (MJ) or (PJ) and not with respect to (EJ). Therefore, my conclusion is the following: while beliefs without evidence cannot be justified in an epistemic sense (because evidence is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for epistemic justification), beliefs without evidence can be justified in a prudential or moral sense.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Feldman and Conee, *Evidentialism*, 2.

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# EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM: INTER-CONTEXTUALITY IN THE PROBLEM OF THE CRITERION

Rodrigo LAERA

**ABSTRACT:** This paper proposes a view on epistemic relativism that arises from the problem of the criterion, keeping in consideration that the assessment of criterion standards always occurs in a certain context. The main idea is that the epistemic value of the assertion “*S* knows that *p*” depends not only on the criterion adopted within an epistemic framework and the relationship between said criterion and a meta-criterion, but also from the collaboration with other subjects who share the same standards. Thus, one can choose between particularist and methodist criteria according to the context of assessment. This position has the advantage of presenting a new perspective concerning both the criterion problem and the problem of inter-contextuality in the evaluation of different epistemic frameworks.

**KEYWORDS:** relativism, criterion problem, epistemic framework, contextualism

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, “epistemic relativism” will be understood as the idea that there is no unchanging hierarchy of criteria for both the identification and assessment of different epistemic frameworks. This characterization of epistemic relativism refers to a rather uncontentious version of epistemic pluralism in the way that (a) there is more than one set of criteria that can legitimate an attribution of knowledge and (b) a ‘parity thesis’ which implies that no set of criteria is superior to the others.<sup>1</sup> As such, there exist alternative epistemic frameworks<sup>2</sup> without the necessity for some constant occurrence which gives origin to a group of criteria which are superior to others.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example: Maria Baghramian, *Relativism* (London: Routledge, 2004), Mark Kalderon, “Epistemic Relativism,” *Philosophical Review* 118, 2 (2009): 225-240.

<sup>2</sup> According to Pritchard, epistemic frameworks can be understood as clusters of epistemic principles which determine the epistemic standing of beliefs or knowledge. See Duncan Pritchard, “Defusing Epistemic Relativism,” *Synthese* 166, 2 (2009): 397-412.

<sup>3</sup> This must be clearly distinguished from the problem of epistemic over-determination as a common phenomenon – one can come to know the very same proposition *P* by testimony, visual perception, auditory perception, and so on – from the fact that one can consider the

On the contrary, epistemic realism, or epistemic absolutism, will be understood as the belief that there exists an unchanging group of epistemic relations which apply to all context and that said group can be discovered via philosophical reflection. As an opposition to epistemic relativism, it can be claimed that although the attributions of knowledge can change with their circumstances, at least some norm must fix said attributions so that individuals can attribute knowledge in distinct contexts. In the absence of shared norms or criteria for the attribution of knowledge, it would not be possible to compare the different ways of knowing the world and, in consequence, neither could relativism sustain itself.<sup>4</sup> Against epistemic realism it can be argued that epistemic relations are, in fact, sensitive to their context. Each context is dependent on a determined epistemic framework and what is affirmed in one context can be negated in another without contradiction. Natural language not only communicates something in relation with the context of use, but also tells us something with respect to the context of assessment.<sup>5</sup> The attributions of knowledge are statements which pertain to natural language; they are a part of and depend on it. In consequence, epistemic realism would seem to be false.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the background differences, it is worth asking ourselves if it is possible to reconcile both positions, finding some sort of golden mean which may provide an explanation to the suspected disagreement that subjects in different contexts could experience towards a certain attribution of knowledge given that the criteria that constitute an epistemic framework are generalizations of particular attributions of knowledge. In that sense, while (a) relativism is defensible considering that epistemic frameworks are relevant to legitimize attributions of knowledge, it does not follow that (b) there are no criteria to be shared across different frameworks, which makes the same rules applicable to similar circumstances. Therefore, while thesis (a) is important to relativists, thesis

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reliability of said sources as a legitimate criteria for the attribution of knowledge. Thus, that an individual can know *P* from a range of sources does not mean that it can know *P* from a range of criteria; *criteria* and *sources* cannot be taken as similar concepts.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). More recently, see: Markus Seidel, *Epistemic Relativism: A Constructive Critique* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> I follow MacFarlane's distinction between context of use and context of assessment. See John MacFarlane, "Making Sense of Relative Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian society* 105, 3 (2005): 321-339, or also by the same author: *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> A similar argument can be found in Michael Williams, "Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism Is Not Relativism," *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 4, 1 (2007): 93-114.

(b) is a statement that relativism could easily challenge arguing that frameworks and epistemic evaluation criteria cannot overlap themselves. The contribution about the suspicion of disagreement is supported on thesis (b) without assuming that criteria are fixed and unchanging.

This paper proposes that one can agree with particularism – in which the instances of knowledge come prior to a knowledge criterion – or with methodism – where a criterion comes prior to knowledge instances –, according to the circumstances the assessor finds itself leading, in that way, to methodism and relativist particularism respectively. The sharing of such meta-epistemological principles enables an implicit agreement between the hierarchy of criteria and the instances of knowledge, which in turn will allow us to identify alternative epistemic frameworks to be assessed.

Thus, the particular circumstances that the subjects of assessment go through converge with the epistemic norms of assessment criteria for the attribution of knowledge. In another way, the assessment criteria are a (theoretical) consequence of how subjects in a determined community cooperate, and of the success of said cooperation.<sup>7</sup> To illustrate this point, we can consider the frequent debate between creationists and evolutionists. The creationists sustain that every living being is the result of God's creation, an act performed in accordance with a divine purpose. In contrast, the evolutionists affirm that every living being on Earth descends from a universal common ancestor. Both would surely assess their respective attributions of knowledge in agreement with standards which pertain to their respective epistemic framework; a framework which they adhere to as a result of their particular circumstances. But they can understand each other, since they have points in common which permit certain cooperation. Even more, if a third party decided to assess both positions, it too would do so both according to the assessment criteria that determine its beliefs and in cooperation with other parties who share the same standards (even though these standards can often be implicit).<sup>8</sup> Even though the reconciliation of relativism and absolutism and conflicting epistemic frameworks are two different

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<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Steven Hales, *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), to whom irreconcilable differences may lead to epistemic relativism, which arise when opposing parties cannot even agree upon the meta-criteria of a controversial statement.

<sup>8</sup> It never hurts to clarify the difference between an epistemic framework, a criterion, and a standard: Standards are epistemic norms which, combined into a whole, integrate an epistemic framework. A standard becomes a criterion when it is used for making judgments or decisions. Besides, the word 'standard' refers to a norm or set of norms that are normally followed, whilst the concept of 'criteria' is more far-reaching as it can encompass norms which are not frequently followed.

projects, if it could be proved that there is a connection among epistemic frameworks but that they change in time, then we would be advocating a middle ground between relativism and absolutism.

The following section is dedicated to the problem of the criterion, in which we consider that the meta-criteria necessary to assess attributions of knowledge depend on both the context in which the assessor finds itself and on the collaboration with other subjects with whom it shares the same standards of attribution. Thus, these criteria can be just as particularist as methodist; if what we assess are daily practices, then they will be particularist, and if what we assess are standards, norms or epistemological theories, then we establish a methodist meta-context. The third section will address the problem of epistemic relativism in relation with mankind's capacity to successfully collaborate and to replace certain criteria with others which work better. Finally, we will use the Azande culture as an example to illustrate these points.

## 2. The Problem of Criterion in Context

According to relativism, the truth value of an affirmation or belief depends on the epistemic standard which is relevant in the assessment context. With this there is no neutral answer to the question of whether or not an affirmation or belief is correct; diverse standards can be used within the alternative epistemic frameworks. However, the idea that relativists assess and attribute knowledge via criteria that constitute an epistemic framework leads to the problem of how justify said criteria.

Given a determined epistemic framework, the relativist justifies the formation of his beliefs – at least *prima facie* – on the grounds of his own relativist criteria, and the creationist and evolutionist justify their beliefs with their own respective standards. Furthermore, such criteria can only be justified with particular beliefs which themselves are not assessed as relative. In such a way, we arrive at a variation of the traditional problem of the criterion.

The problem of the criterion affirms the incompatibility of two alternatives:<sup>9</sup>

- (a) In order to recognize instances of knowledge and determine their extension, we need to know the knowledge criteria.
- (b) In order to know the knowledge criteria we need to recognize their instances.

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<sup>9</sup> Here I follow the Chisholm's strategy to present the problem. See Rodrick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1973) and *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

- (c) We can neither know the extension nor know the knowledge criterion, because (a) and (b) are either equally true or equally false.

However, we identify three possible answers to this problem. First, we can begin by specifying what counts as a legitimate method and use it in order to justify doxastic states (methodism). Secondly, we can begin by identifying particular cases of knowledge and investigate the use of these cases, to later assess general criteria (particularism). For example, Descartes, Locke and Hume can be considered advocates of methodism, while Reid is considered an advocate of particularism. This is owed to the fact that both Descartes' rationalism and Locke and Hume's empiricism try to establish the conditions necessary for the acquisition of knowledge, while Reid's particularism tries to investigate the reach and extension of knowledge in order to later make generalizations.

Both the methodist focus and the particularist focus have been effectively defended using naturalist conceptions.<sup>10</sup> However, neither is sufficient to offer any type of neutral argument which impedes the satisfaction of relativist demands. In fact, for methodism, the criterion to determine instances of knowledge will be presented in the form of an unjustified meta-criterion – even if said meta-criterion comes from the same naturalistic rationale as the criterion itself – so, in the best of cases, its substantiation will be of circular nature. A similar process will occur for particularism because a certain set of rules will be required for every assessment of an instance of knowledge in order to consider it as fully-fledged knowledge. As a matter of fact, those epistemic frameworks which may have allowed attributions of knowledge to survive share some basic elements as the subjects that use any framework, for the sole matter of using it, show a degree of linguistic proficiency that can be semantically assessed by the means of rules accepted within the framework itself. In other words, for *p* to be taken as part of a set of knowledge, there must be a background of rules accepted within a specific epistemic framework. Whether we settle either for methodism or particularism, a dialectical deadlock will be reached because the controversy amongst particularists and methodists cannot be solved for reasons intelligible to the disputing parties.

Following this line of thought, it can note – or distinguish – three principle characteristics of epistemic relativism, in relation with both the methodist and

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<sup>10</sup> An example of methodist focus can be found in Steven Luper, "Epistemic Relativism," *Philosophical Issues* 14, 1 (2004): 271-295. However, an example of particularist focus can be found in Howard Sankey, "Witchcraft, Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion," *Erkenntnis* 72, 1 (2010): 1-16; or also "Scepticism, Relativism and a Naturalistic Particularism," *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy*, 2015: 1-18.

particularist perspectives – besides allowing us to present relativism in a way that serves the purpose of assessing criteria depending on the context of the assessor.

**Particular relativism:**

- (a) There are many ways to know the world.
- (b) The ways of knowing the world are determined by particular cases of knowledge.
- (c) All the particular cases that lead to knowledge of the world are equally valid.

**Methodist relativism:**

- (a) There are many ways to know the world.
- (b) The ways of knowing the world are determined by criteria that pertain to the culture in which we live.
- (c) All of the criteria that lead to knowledge of the world are equally valid.

Methodist relativism seems more plausible than that of the particularist, as the latter can be interpreted as subjectivism in which all beliefs or attributions of knowledge can be considered equally valid. The implausibility of this point of view is found in the fact that there can be cases in which *S* knows that man is a product of divine creation without the necessity to argue in favor of the standards which contribute to *S*'s knowledge, yet at the same time, there can also be cases in which *S* can both have this knowledge and argue in favor of said standards; both cases would be considered legitimate attributions of knowledge, and there is no epistemic difference between both them. Perhaps this position can be smoothened by interpreting relativism as a type of internalism, in sustaining that, eventually, one's self-confidence guarantees the possession of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> All attributions of knowledge use the first person as a reference, even though one may not be capable of correcting their own beliefs. For this correction to be possible the belief needs to be contrasted by, at the very least, another belief. In consequence, one's self-confidence must be coherent with a group of accepted beliefs – or an epistemic framework – so as not to end once again in the arbitrariness of subjectivism. For example, the particular belief that mankind is a divine creation must be contrasted and, later, be coherent with the theist epistemic framework in order for it to constitute knowledge. If we contrast this with the evolutionist epistemic framework, this theist belief will be corrected for its incoherence.

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<sup>11</sup> Internalism in the way the condition necessary to assess attributions of knowledge depends on some factor inside the subject's mind and that, ultimately, it would be the subject's confidence on its own abilities (see, for example, Keith Lehrer, *Self-Trust: A Study of Reason, Knowledge, and Autonomy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). For an interpretation of internalism connected with relativism, see: Rodrigo Laera, *Los desvíos de la razón: el lugar de la facticidad en la cadena de justificaciones* (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2011).

The notion of coherence implies – implicitly or not – the existence of a group of beliefs which constitute an epistemic framework, which leads us to a slip from particularism to methodism, as the notion of coherence requires a previous criterion. Although the intuition of common sense continues to be preponderant, in this case it also constitutes a criterion for confrontation; we can differentiate the acceptance of an attribution from its respective criterion, since it is from common sense that one accepts attributions that, before becoming explicit, one could not have ever accepted; even so, in both cases (before and after becoming explicit) the criterion for acceptance would be the same.

If the assessment criteria with which knowledge is attributed are shared by an epistemic community, then the assessor that endorses either the correctness or incorrectness of said criteria can only do so by means of a meta-criteria acting as a presupposition. But, what happens if the assessor also adheres to relativism, where no hierarchy of epistemic frameworks can be construed? Returning to the disagreement between the creationist and the evolutionist: If one considers that the creationist's position as well as the evolutionist's are correct within their own epistemic frameworks, then how can it be possible to concede a central role to the testimony of the Holy Texts or the word of God? And, similarly, how can it be possible to concede the same role to the Darwinian theory of natural selection? In this sense, the relativist position seems incompatible with both religious and secular points of view, as neither is treated as a trustworthy source of truthful beliefs which are independent of their epistemic frameworks. And, as the relativist considers himself incapable of offering validation from his own framework to another, independent epistemic framework, he will also be incapable of offering an independent assessment of the epistemic framework of some possible adversary.

However, if the conditions necessary to semantically classify alternative meta-criteria were not to be found in an epistemic framework, then it would not be possible to offer any explanation on how to identify an unconnected epistemic framework provided it is necessary to identify them as such before assessing them.<sup>12</sup> If one simply identified an epistemic framework with a group of standards that determine the subjective assessment of the attribution of knowledge, then this would cause the unfortunate result in that the creationist, the evolutionist and the relativist base themselves in exclusive epistemic frameworks, without any one being able to identify the others' framework. Said in another way, if the subject's

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<sup>12</sup> Radical relativist thesis on epistemic frameworks: there are epistemic frameworks completely different amongst themselves to the point there cannot be any possible translation from one to the other, thus making them totally incommensurable.

context determines their attributions of knowledge, then how is it possible to assess distinct contexts in the third person? How is it possible to affirm, then, that the creationist and the evolutionist disagree? How can one solve the problem of reporting knowledge in frameworks distinct from his own? Such problems have to do with the intuition that we possess the capacity to recognize other assessment criteria, and that the evolutionist and the creationist sustain contradicting theories. Otherwise it would be irrational to try and assess criteria that are not shared.

If then in some contexts normal speakers would not reach the conventional meaning of the statements in which knowledge is attributed: despite being informed of all the relevant facts, these speakers would be incapable of making correct and literal usage of them. Normal speakers in this sort of context would find themselves confused concerning what requires the attribution of knowledge. However, one must keep in mind that the intuition of any competent speaker knows when he says that he knows. For example, let us consider that *S* is an ordinary speaker unfamiliar with the necessary and sufficient conditions that must be met to properly use a concept like 'democracy' in Ancient Greece. Nevertheless, *S* argues that Plato was against democracy, so one could state that '*S* knows that Plato was against democracy' while being familiar with the concept of 'democracy' in the Ancient Greek context. Hence, one could assume that whatever *S* knows is encompassed within certain specific criteria (those that uphold that 'democracy is a representative form of government') and that if one knows said criteria, then it cannot endorse that *S* knows that Plato was against democracy. In this way, it can be said an assessor is 'competent' when it is aware of the conditions of reference. If epistemic frameworks were disconnected amongst themselves – being the old frame different to the modern one – then no-one could say that that someone knows that Plato was against democracy because it would be simply impossible to understand what 'democracy' meant in the Ancient Greek world. There is always a margin of ignorance about the criteria of other epistemic frameworks, but this margin does not prevent us of inter-contextually assessing contributions of knowledge in other epistemic frameworks.

Returning again to particularism, is it necessary to take samples of relevant individual cases in order to establish criteria? The Gettier cases – where the traditional consideration of knowledge as a 'true, justified belief' is challenged – are a good example that it seems inevitable to follow our intuitions, and that a large part of epistemology's history is also sufficient evidence for this. Indeed, if with Plato it had been established that knowledge is true belief justified as a rigid or invariable criterion, then the history of epistemology would not have paid



attention to any supposed counterexample, since the Gettier cases would not have been appropriate. In consequence, there is something in daily intuition relevant to establishing epistemological meta-criteria. Above all, knowledge is something normal in man.

In agreement with the application of criteria, one can opt for methodism or particularism, depending on the context in which the assessor finds himself. For example, when the assessment context has demanding standards – as is the case for a Cartesian epistemologist – surely methodism will be sustained. On the contrary, when the assessment context is not sufficiently demanding – as occurs in the case of those who participate in everyday assessments – then surely particularism will be relied upon to attribute knowledge. This position is adequate to resolve skeptic questions. Thus, in the contexts in which criteria appropriate to a philosophical conversation are applied, in which skeptic possibilities are considered, the criteria-concerning standards for the attribution of knowledge are extremely high. Although different contextualists may affirm different things with respect to how these standards arise, this does not affect the idea that in said contexts it is false to say that *S* knows that he is not a brain in a vat and, therefore, that it is false to say that *S* knows that he has hands. Notwithstanding, in the non-philosophic context of ordinary life the skeptic possibilities are not considered, because the criteria-concerning standards for the attribution of knowledge are low. In this context, *S* knows implicitly that he is not a brain in a vat, because he knows that he has two hands. The epistemic relativist can utilize the skeptic argument to establish that there are no rational motives to consider that an epistemic framework is subordinate to another. In as much as the skeptic judgment is rejected by a subject living in everyday life, one ends up accepting the skeptic argument, since the standards of assessment are automatically raised. Indeed, to negate skepticism appealing to everyday situations implies that he who negates does so from a philosophic point of view.

All of this leads us to the consideration that there cannot be inter-contextual judgments, and so neither is there an authentic disagreement between parties. The skeptic can sustain that the attributions of knowledge that are carried out within everyday contexts are false, but the speakers in everyday contexts cannot directly reject the negation of knowledge expressed by the skeptics. One cannot deny what another affirms. Overall, what the skeptic is affirming is that *S* does know not that *p* in accordance with high epistemic standards, although this affirmation may be compatible with the affirmation that *S* does know that *p* according to the permissive, or low, standards of everyday life.

But, why is it that in some moments  $S$  knows that  $p$  and in other moments  $S$  doesn't know that  $p$ ? What does it mean that the criteria-concerning standards are sufficiently high or sufficiently low? These questions introduce the problem of relativism in terms of cooperation for the attribution of knowledge, since for conversations to function in both contexts one must implicitly accept distinct criteria for knowledge. And this implicit acceptance that happens within the same epistemic community will also happen in communities when, upon passing judgments, make use of very different criteria. Upon introducing the problem within the same community, the question is; what does it mean to say "implicitly accept a criterion in a determined context"? One can adhere to contextualism and sustain that both the changes of context and the changes of standards of criteria are induced by the dynamic of conversation. However, it is important to differentiate the notion of "context" from that of "epistemic framework." This difference is clear because the contexts can change within the same framework. The attributions of knowledge are sensitive to context because they share criteria or meta-criteria. These criteria make the notion of "to know" change context, yet maintain the epistemic strength of its epistemic framework of reference.<sup>13</sup>

When a conversation takes place – with others or with oneself –, a family of interrelated subjects is assumed. The pertinence of one subject establishes the continuity of the conversation without producing a rupture, while non-pertinence in a subject would produce such a break. Thus, in some cases we ask the question, "How does one know that  $p$ ?" in order to know that he knows, while in other cases we directly inquire about what is known. This is not due exclusively to the epistemic frameworks in which we assess, but also to the very genesis of belief. With this, intercontextual judgments can be judgments about the truth values of the attributions of knowledge which occur under one epistemic framework, although the genesis of the beliefs can be the same. For example, the reliability of perception can be taken as a stable relation between the subject and the object of knowledge, although its content may change with the epistemic framework. The apparent perceptions of rain are reliably connected to a hierarchy of criteria above other possible beliefs in such a way that allows one to believe that it is raining. In consequence, the perception of rain justifies the belief that it is raining, as well as

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<sup>13</sup> Generally, contextualism sustains that a subject  $S$  knows a proposition  $p$  with respect to the epistemic standards of the moment of attribution – as Cohen and DeRose have sustained, for example (Stewart Cohen, "Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons," *Noûs* 33, no. 13 (1999): 57-89. Keith DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context*, Vol. 1: *Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. While relativism sustains that the truth – of sentences or propositions – is relative not only to the contexts of use, but also the contexts of assessment.

the belief that it is believed to be raining, all in virtue of different groups of reliable connections. In fact, the reliable connection of the perceptions of rain with the belief that it is raining make it so that said belief is justified in the Western epistemic framework as in other epistemic frameworks. Epistemic frameworks can be connected via criteria or meta-criteria that integrate them; these also allow that some frameworks imitate others when they are more successful.

### 3. Epistemic Relativism and the Reliability of Perception in the Azande Case

So far, it has been sustained that certain epistemological relativism can be both particularist and methodist provided two reservations are made. The first of them is that the existence of a hierarchy or ranking of criteria that make a source of knowledge reliable – and its assessment, legitimate – is put forward. The second one consists in upholding that the different epistemic frameworks are connected amongst themselves in terms of both cooperation and of success. These provisions make relativism so moderate that it would seem as though a middle ground has been reached between it and absolutism. Now, one argument that assumes that the relativist theory, as it has been exhibited in this paper, is erroneous can be presented in the following way: if we construct the fact that  $p$  is the case and another society constructs – even simultaneously – the fact that  $not-p$  is the case, it is possible that at the same time  $p$  and  $not-p$  are the case. But, how could there be a world such that, being one and the same,  $p$  and  $not-p$  be the case at the same time?

In another way:

- (a) A community constructs the fact  $x$ , such that if  $x$  then  $p$ .
- (b) It is possible that another community has constructed the fact  $x$  such that if  $x$  then  $not-p$ .
- (c) Thus, it is possible that  $S$  knows that  $p$  and that  $not-p$ , if  $x$  is analyzed by  $S$  from an independent framework
- (d) In consequence, given that the principle of noncontradiction is unbreakable, relativism is not possible.

Notwithstanding, this argument also can be presented as begging the question, as the same argument introduces at the same time a neutral criterion of rationality and a criterion of the impossibility of breaking the principle of noncontradiction. The previous argument tries to demonstrate that relativism is not possible or that the relativist position, at least, is found to be unjustified in such a way that there would not be any possible world in which  $p$  and  $not-p$  are assessed as true – always assuming an absolute principle that does not depend on a

specific framework. However, if one accepts epistemological pluralism, it can be expected that there be a culture that does violate the principle of noncontradiction, sheltered in its own epistemic framework.

Recently, Bland has suggested that it is not necessary to respond to the criterion problem with the objective of resisting epistemic relativism, as it is always possible to attack the idea that all epistemic frameworks have the same value, establishing the superiority of one or more epistemic frameworks.<sup>14</sup> This can be achieved via the revision of that which they have in common, focusing in how the criteria-concerning standards depend on one another, as much as for their justification as for their application. Of course, it is different to justify a standard than to apply a criterion. As Alston has observed, the normative generalizations only are applied to subjects that can govern their conduct with respect to these standards; small children and animals lack this capacity and both acquire an elemental level of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, there is an environment of application of the standard that is not generalized. The same occurs with the difference between criteria and meta-criteria. The first are generalized by the second, while the second are applied. There is an important distinction between an empiric explication about the genesis of the attributions of knowledge and the application of the standards that must be satisfied by beliefs in order to attribute knowledge.

Take the anthropologic description developed by Evans-Pritchard of the Zande community as a sample of an epistemic framework diametrically opposite to that of Western culture.<sup>16</sup> The Azande believe that some men are witch-doctors and that they can, through a psychic act, do harm. Witchcraft consists of an inherited substance in the bodies of witch-doctors, which is transmitted by unilineal filiation from fathers to sons: all the sons of a witch-doctor are witch-doctors, and all the daughters of a witch are witches, but the sons of witches are not witch-doctors.<sup>17</sup> Of course, this reasoning defies the most rooted logical

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<sup>14</sup> See Steven Bland, "Scepticism, Relativism, and the Structure of Epistemic Frameworks," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, 44, 4 (2013): 539-544.

<sup>15</sup> See William Alston, "What's Wrong With Immediate Knowledge?" *Synthese* 55, 1 (1983): 73-95.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> According to Richard Jennings, "Zande Logic and Western Logic," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 40, 2 (1989): 275-285, the argument can be expressed in the following way:

a) All witches, and only witches, have the substance of witchcraft;

intuition in the Western world: the principle of non-contradiction, with which one can more clearly see the begging the question when coherence is introduced as a preponderant factor in any epistemic framework.<sup>18</sup> However, despite the logical inconsistency, the framework of magical beliefs functions in their community, as any inconsistency with a particular phenomenon is articulated with practical life, preserving their cultural identity.

The Azande also believed that all unfortunate events were consequences of an act of witchcraft, placing their trust in the Poison Oracle. This oracle consisted, according to the description of Evans-Pritchard, in that each participant took a fowl, and once everyone who desired to consult with the oracle was seated they decided upon the questions necessary in order to give the most information possible to the seer. Then, the seer would pour rainwater on a leaf placed over a hole and place the poisonous dust on top. After making a paste, the seer would put part of the mixture in the beak of the fowl. One of the members would ask the first question and the seer would propose an answer. If the answer was correct, then the fowl would die. Otherwise, another dose of poison would be given to the fowl and another question would be formed, and so on. The characteristic of this method is that, for the natives, the oracle is infallible, since if the fowl does not die it is because some other mysterious power has intervened. That is to say, a sort of ad hoc hypothesis is looked for in order to safeguard their beliefs, but the efficiency of the predictions is never questioned.

However, the Poison Oracle's result is not informative unless it can be bound to regularities (natural or unnatural) and with reliable shared sources which may lead to shared criteria. Besides, Zande history allows us to think that epistemic frameworks, although different, have some criteria in common that allow their interpretation and assessment. For example, the Holy Scripture is revealed to the theologians by reliable sources – such as perception and memory –

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- b) The substance of witchcraft is inherited by the children of the same sex of the witch-doctor/witch;
  - c) The Zande clan is a group of people biologically related between themselves by means of the male lineage;
  - d) The man *A* of clan *C* is a witch-doctor;
  - e) All of the men, in clan *C*, are witch-doctors.

<sup>18</sup> Triplett questioned that there is a radical difference between the Azande's way of reasoning and that of a Western man, since the logical inconsistencies, like those of the Azande, are common in the natural language of any Western man (In: Timm Triplett, "Azande Logic versus Western Logic?" *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 39 (1988): 361-366). See also: Steven French, "Partial Structures and the Logic of Azande," *Principia: An International Journal of Epistemology* 15, 1 (2011): 77-105.

that are shared even by those who do not believe in the Holy Scriptures. Because both sources remain stable in time, it is possible to be Christian or not. In other words, the revelation of the oracles – as occurs in the revelation of the Scriptures – are reliable only while perception, memory, and inductive reasoning are reliable. Therefore, the use of these empiric methods undermines the oracular practices and the revelations of the Holy Scriptures. Both the Azande and the theologians cooperate implicitly with reliable sources, although they may wish to safeguard unreliable epistemic criteria with ad hoc hypotheses.

Reliability is a meta-epistemological principle that is the product of the functioning of norms, and it is not another norm. For example, perception can be a reliable source in determined contexts, in which case it functions as a standard for the attribution of knowledge. Reliability is not a standard of knowledge, but rather is needed by perception in order to constitute this standard. Although the sources of knowledge may be different in the Zande case and in Western culture, both epistemic frameworks need their respective sources to be reliable. Therefore, although distinct criteria are applied, the reliability in one case and the other remains stable. What's more, one can believe that a determined process is reliable without having an adequate reason and still not violate any intellectual obligation – the criterion that sustain said reliability would be put in doubt. Thus, the criteria-concerning standards are produced in a determined context without this altering the fact that they are reliable, even considering that it is a mistake to think of the disagreements between Western culture and that of the Azande in terms of a neutral arbitration.

Although the application of any criterion implies that it can fail, since there can be another more important or more basic criterion that defeats it, the connection with other criteria will continue to be successful. This is because criteria cannot fail holistically. An epistemic framework cannot be abandoned in a general way, but rather the frameworks change through their connection with other epistemic frameworks beginning with their shared criteria. Suppose there is a conversation between a Western farmer and a member of the Zande community that wants to explain the cause of the bad harvest that year. The farmer will affirm that it is due to meteorological causes and that these causes will be related to empiric observations. The Azande can also think in meteorological causes – although they lack the explicit concept of “causality” – but they will relate them to the substance of witchcraft. However, both will agree that the reliability of perception – the presence of the drought – gives place to an explanation. This starting point makes the disagreement between both cultures and both epistemic frameworks possible. Along these lines, the reliability of perception serves as a

shared criterion that bridges the cultural gap between a Zande and a Western farmer. Accordingly, from a particularistic relativism point of view it could be said that the instances of knowledge are equally valid in both cases and that, from a methodist relativism perspective, both criteria are valid depending on the epistemic framework.

It could also be argued that if there were a set of privileged criteria within a hierarchy, then we would be facing some sort of criteriologic foundationalism. Classic foundationalism grants a privileged status to a group of basic beliefs, on which other beliefs support themselves in order to attribute to these first beliefs the character of knowledge, leaving the circumstances in the background. Relativism does not necessarily reject this conception, but rather states that it can be sustained with the exception that the beliefs be basic from the point of view of a determined epistemic framework. It can match distinct basic beliefs to another framework. The same occurs with reliability: a belief is reliable only within a determined epistemic framework. In this way, it is important to differentiate relativism in the attribution of knowledge from metaphysic relativism. The first is centered not only on the role of the context of usage and on the facts of the world that are sentences, but also on the context of assessment. Metaphysic relativism also considers the semantic interpretation as a function of the assessment of truth values, but with the difference that this assessment is nothing more than a description, in part, of possible worlds. As there are no worlds more truthful than others, the same facts that determine the functional values are relative and not absolute.<sup>19</sup>

To privilege the context of usage allows that one put himself in another's position, although they may be very different. But although one can place himself in another's position, this is always done from a context of assessment. In this context the criteria of their framework are applied, proposing a determined interpretation – as Pritchard does when he describes the Zande culture. And, again, this is possible because two apparently distinct epistemic frameworks have shared criteria, although these criteria may occupy a distinct place in each framework – and not because there are possible worlds that act as references. The sentence “*S* knows that *p*” is an invitation to consider the facts in a certain way, since it represents how things are for who expresses the sentence. On saying that *S* knows, one finds themselves invited to think, what is it to know something, in such a way that *S* counts as someone who knows. If the invitation is accepted – if the criteria are cooperated with and the conversation takes place –, standards of

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<sup>19</sup> Cfr., Isidora Stojanovic, “The Scope and the Subtleties of the Contextualism / Literalism / Relativism Debate,” *Language and Linguistics Compass* 2, 6 (2008): 1171-1188.

knowledge are established that, for the purpose of the conversation, are correct. In this way, following Richard, an affirmation can be both an invitation to conceptualize things in a certain way, and a representation of how things are.<sup>20</sup> On lacking an image of the affirmation on which objections to established norms or standards rest, the idea can be installed in *S* that there is only one notion of “to know that *p*,” although the extension can be determined by diverse criteria in distinct epistemic frameworks.

Finally, returning to the difference between a farmer from a Western culture and the Azande culture, both can dialogue and realize inter-contextual judgments because both epistemic frameworks share some criteria, although both are capable of imposing different extensions (and therefore intentions) on sentences with the form “*S* knows that *p*.” The attributions of knowledge are displaced in order to form sentences in which they are correctly used, as long as they cooperate and do not resist the application of the criterion.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper we have presented the problem of the criterion as a meta-epistemological problem that does not require a definitive answer. Considered in the contextual reach of the attributions of knowledge, methodism or particularism can be applied in order to assess attributions of knowledge in distinct ways, depending on the context. Both options are bound to the processes that are established through a meta-criterion with which they cooperate – it is accepted as an assumption. Thus, the cooperation that is necessary for there to be negotiation between both parts and disagreement.

Firstly, the notion of “*S* knows that *p*” with its respective variants is bound to accommodation of different frameworks. Epistemic attributions in different contexts (or in different subjects that use such expressions to frame their thoughts for themselves), have as a result that the uses of “*S* knows that *p*” in different speakers can have different truth vales, as in the case of the creationist and the evolutionist. But any of these speakers (or thinkers) can, in principal, recognize agreement or disagreement to their usages of “*S* knows that *p*”.

In addition, the discussion concerning criteria is not merely metalinguistic. In the case of the creationist that chooses to argue with the evolutionist, they do not discuss whether or not one “knows” nor the application of this concept. They discuss the origin of the species that inhabit Earth, from distinct criteria with

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<sup>20</sup> Mark Richard, “Contextualism and Relativism,” *Philosophical Studies* 119 (2004): 215-242.



which, at least in part, they mutually collaborate – the same can be said of a supposed disagreement between the Western farmer and the Zande farmer.

To conclude, any report made concerning the contradiction between subjects that pertain to distinct epistemic frameworks, finds itself mediated by its assessment criteria. The attributions of knowledge of the reporter also are made in accordance with different epistemic norms and, in this sense, relativism often accommodates itself well to inter-contextual demands<sup>21</sup>.

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# MODAL RATIONALISM AND THE OBJECTION FROM THE INSOLVABILITY OF MODAL DISAGREEMENT

Mihai RUSU

**ABSTRACT:** The objection from the insolvability of principle-based modal disagreements appears to support the claim that there are no objective modal facts, or at the very least modal facts cannot be accounted for by modal rationalist theories. An idea that resurfaced fairly recently in the literature is that the use of ordinary empirical statements presupposes some prior grasp of modal notions. If this is correct, then the idea that we may have a total agreement concerning empirical facts and disagree on modal facts, which is the starting point of the objection from the insolvability of modal disagreement, is undercut. This paper examines the no-separation thesis and shows that some of the arguments against the classical (empiricist) distinction between empirical and modal statements fail to be conclusive if they are taken to defend a strong notion of metaphysical possibility. The no-separation thesis appears to work only in theoretical frameworks where metaphysical modalities are considered (broadly) conceptual. For these reasons, the no-separation thesis cannot save modal rationalism from the insolvability of modal disagreement.

**KEYWORDS:** metaphysical modality, modal rationalism, principle-based account, modal disagreement, Alan Sidelle, Robert Brandom

## 1. Are There Modal Facts?

The claim that there is a substantial separation between modal knowledge and ordinary knowledge is a staple of (classical) empiricism and it has persisted in a radical and dominant form in the analytic tradition of the first half of the past century. Although the rehabilitation of modal notions is the joint result of many contributions, both logical and philosophical, Kripke is generally credited with the decisive role in dispelling the prevalent modal scepticism of the time, which originated partially in empiricist doubts about strong modal notions. But Kripke also acquiesced to (or at least did not explicitly reject) the idea that there is a fundamental distinction between the modal and the non-modal. As a result, the attempt to develop and maintain a substantial account of robust metaphysical modality while at the same time holding that modalities have an exceptional (*viz.*, going beyond empirical evidence) character has been the main challenge of post-

Kripkean theories of modality. Most of these theories have taken a cue from Kripke by explaining metaphysically necessary truths as being derived from necessary a priori principles.<sup>1</sup> This is the fundamental idea of *modal rationalism*, i.e. the tenet that modal a posteriori truths are dependent on necessary principles that are known a priori.

Now, there is an objection to such principle-based accounts that is, at least in my opinion, quite forceful. While I must concede that an adequate understanding of its mechanism and significance requires a high degree of familiarity with the contemporary literature on the subject matter, I will try to summarize this objection in what follows.<sup>2</sup>

As already stated above, the modal rationalist holds that necessary a posteriori truths are grounded in a priori principles. For instance, it is necessarily true that Isabella Rossellini is the daughter of Ingrid Bergman. This modal a posteriori truth has its source in the a priori principle called 'Necessity (Essentiality) of origin,' which states that if a certain thing (living being, artefact, etc.) has a certain origin, it has it as a matter of necessity. We just 'fill in' this principle with some empirical information (such as the fact stated above) and we obtain our necessary conclusion by *modus ponens*. E.g.:

If Isabella Rossellini is the daughter of Ingrid Bergman, then necessarily, Isabella Rossellini is the daughter of Ingrid Bergman.

Isabella Rossellini is the daughter of Ingrid Bergman.

Necessarily, Isabella Rossellini is the daughter of Ingrid Bergman.

The objection to modal rationalism that serves as the starting point of this paper can be articulated in the following way. If, as modal rationalists want it, modal distinctions are objective, then there is one correct account of modal truth. This account is supposed to give us the right image of modal reality, and also explain how it is that we come to know it. But it seems plausible that two equally sophisticated philosophers *who develop their reflections starting from the same*

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<sup>1</sup> A brief formulation of the modal rationalist stance can be found in Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 109.

<sup>2</sup> See Christopher Peacocke, *Being Known* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), for a typical rationalist theory concerning modality, Crispin Wright, "On Knowing What is Necessary: Three Limitations of Peacocke's Account," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (2002): 655-62, Sonia Roca-Royes, "Modal Epistemology, Modal Concepts and the Integration Challenge," *Dialectica* 64 (2010): 335-61, and my own paper, "On the Epistemology of Modal Rationalism: the Main Problems and Their Significance," *Logos & Episteme. An International Journal of Epistemology* VI, 1 (2015): 75-94, for a critical assessment of modal rationalism.

*empirical facts* will work out incompatible accounts of modal truth and knowledge. For instance, one may endorse Necessity of origin and the other may reject it. Or, to take a more disputed principle, one may accept Essentiality of composition and the other may reject it. So, the two philosophers may agree on all ordinary facts regarding, e. g., Isabella Rossellini's biography or, using one of Kripke's famous examples, the this-worldly profile of a certain lectern, but disagree on modal truths regarding them. Now, the objection runs, there appears to be no objective modal fact that would help us decide which of the two endorses the correct account – because, more generally, there appear to be no modal facts to speak of. Suppose, at least for heuristic reasons, that from a logical point of view the modal profile of an object is virtually unlimited, that we are free to associate any logical predicate with any logical subject whatsoever, except perhaps for cases that would lead in an uncontroversial manner to contradiction (e.g., “Isabella Rossellini is not Isabella Rossellini,” “Isabella Rossellini is younger than Ingrid Bergman and older than Ingrid Bergman,” and so on). This is pretty much the classical Humean view. But anyone who takes modality at least a little seriously would agree that we nevertheless enforce some restrictions on the logical space in order to determine an object's modal profile. Say, few would accept that Isabella Rossellini, the actress, could have been a crocodile. Our two philosophers' accounts would lead then to two different restrictions being enforced on the logical space of possibilities, thereby leading the two thinkers to accept incompatible modal statements as true. One rules out all scenarios where Isabella Rossellini is not the daughter of Ingrid Bergman and the other doesn't. One allows cases where the lectern which is actually made of wood is made of iron (or of totally different pieces of wood), whereas the other rejects them. What the objection says is that the principles that ground these restrictions on possible scenarios do not (because they cannot) report on some modal facts or, at least, that whatever it is they report on, it doesn't have the same objective status that ordinary facts have. As an explanation of why our modal claims are not objective (or thinker-independent), while not being wholly subjective or arbitrary either, the critic may follow some of the alternative accounts of modality and propose that there is some convention, some sort of conceptual truth or a simple habit-induced shutdown of our imagination which engenders our modal intuitions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Amie Thomasson, “Modal Normativism and the Methods of Metaphysics,” *Philosophical Topics* 35 (2007): 135–60, Amie Thomasson, “Norms and Necessity,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51 (2013): 143–60, Robert Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and Simon Blackburn, “Morals

The objection from the insolvability of (apparent) modal disagreement regarding the non-factual character of modal claims is, at least to my mind, a powerful one. Yet, there is one idea that resurfaced fairly recently in the literature regarding modal notions which may provide some hope for proponents of principle-based views. What some contemporary philosophers of modality hold is that the distinction between ordinary, non-modal facts and knowledge, on one side, and modal facts and knowledge, on the other, is a philosophical illusion. Specifically, the way this view may help reject the objection formulated above is by pointing out that if there is no separation between the modal and the non-modal, the hypothesis of two thinkers agreeing about all ordinary facts, but disagreeing on modal ones, cannot stand. The two thinkers must disagree on some empirical fact as well, and it may be this empirical disagreement that helps us explain the modal disagreement (probably in conjunction with some further theoretical input).

The no-separation idea has been developed in various ways in the last two decades or so, but in this paper I will be concerned only with what it can do in support of modal rationalism. As such, I will leave out explicit anti-rationalist views, such as Elder's<sup>4</sup> or Mišćević's<sup>5</sup>, that hold that there is no need for a priori principles in order to ground modal truth. The no-separation idea has been notably expressed in two different, though related, ways: (1) Modal claims are consequences of (our view on) ordinary descriptive sentences; and (2) Grasp of empirical terms used in ordinary descriptive sentences presupposes grasp of modal notions (this is what Brandom calls 'the Kant-Sellars thesis'). The discussion of these two philosophical claims will consider their formulation in the work of Alan Sidelle (for thesis 1) and Robert Brandom (for thesis 2). One may object that these thinkers are not modal rationalists either (and, unlike Elder and Mišćević, they are not even realists about modality), but I believe and hope to show that the significance of the two theses is better evinced in the arguments I will discuss. This has to do with my general outlook on the compatibility of the no-separation idea and modal rationalism. As the reader may have guessed, I am fairly sceptical about this pairing for reasons that will be explained in this paper. Accordingly, my target is not any of the philosophers mentioned in this paragraph, but rather

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and Modals," in *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 52-74 for theories of this sort.

<sup>4</sup> Crawford Elder, "An Epistemological Defence of Realism About Necessity," *Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (1992): 317-36.

<sup>5</sup> Nenad Mišćević, "Explaining Modal Intuition," *Acta Analytica* 18 (2003): 5-41.

Modal Rationalism and the Objection from the Insolvability of Modal Disagreement thinkers who are ontological realists about modality,<sup>6</sup> while maintaining that there is no separation between the empirical and the modal realm, and also that (some of) our modal knowledge is underpinned by a priori principles.

## 2. Modal Assertions as Consequences. Sidelle's Argument

In "Modality and Objects,"<sup>7</sup> Alan Sidelle proposes an argument against metaphysical views which combine realism about objects with conventionalism about modality, such as Ted Sider's position from *Four Dimensionalism*.<sup>8</sup> We will call this combination of doctrines 'the hybrid view' from now on. The argument is developed as follows.

Suppose one thinks that Socrates is essentially human, but his being so is a matter of convention. However, as a realist, one must believe that 'Socrates' refers to some thinker-independent object, *viz.*, that Socrates is a mind-independent object (a human being, in this case). But suppose also that we had introduced another name purportedly for the same object, 'Socrateez' – which is an aggregate term that applies whenever all the elements in the aggregate exist. The question is: is Socrates the same with Socrateez, do the two names refer to one and the same object? Sidelle thinks that the realist must give an affirmative answer to this question. But if this is so, it opens the defender of the hybrid view to the following counterargument:<sup>9</sup>

1. Socrates is essentially human.
2. There could have been conventions applied to Socrates in virtue of which he would not have been essentially human. [by conventionalism about essences, and mind-independence about objects]
3. In some such situations, Socrates is not (or ceases to be) human. [from (2)]
4. Therefore Socrates is not essentially human. [from (3)]

So, Socrates is essentially human, but Socrateez, who is one and the same object with Socrates, is not. And that is a contradiction.

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<sup>6</sup> Ontological realism about modality is not to be equated with the modal realism of David Lewis. The latter may be seen as an eccentric form of ontological realism that holds that possible worlds are real in the same way that our world is real, whereas generic ontological realism about modality just claims that modal statements are made true by objective modal facts.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Sidelle, "Modality and Objects," *Philosophical Quarterly* 60 (2010): 109-25.

<sup>8</sup> Theodore Sider, *Four Dimensionalism: an Ontology of Persistence and Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 207.

<sup>9</sup> Sidelle, "Modality and Objects," 111.

One quick objection to this argument is that the conventionalist view of essence precludes us from using the ‘is essentially’ predicate without any specification. If this use was acceptable, then conventionalism across the board could run into the same problem. If ever two different sets of conventions individuated the same object, the same contradiction would arguably arise. But even if this last hypothesis doesn’t make sense, the defender of the hybrid view could still object that ‘is essentially’ from (1) doesn’t have the same meaning as ‘is essentially’ from (2) and, consequently, (4). She may insist that the deep meaning of the modal conventionalist position is that ‘is essentially *P*’ should never be used without adding the qualification ‘by convention *X*’. In this case, Socrates is essentially human by convention *X*, but not essentially human by convention *Y*. Never is he essentially human by convention *X* and not essentially human by convention *X*, so the contradiction doesn’t arise. But perhaps this is too easy or too vague an objection, so we should inspect closely the theoretical claims that Sidelle uses to defend his view, as they provide some deeper insights into his position.

Sidelle considers a different fundamental objection to his argument: it just states the uncontroversial fact that we are able to provide non-modal conditions for the existence of an object that don’t carry any modal commitments for particular objects. To this objection he replies that “while merely actual conditions may tell us when we have *an* object, we need more to tell us, for any object, *what makes it the object it is*.”<sup>10</sup> So, when considering an object, it is not sufficient to think only of the actual conditions that may help us distinguish it, but also of its *persistence and possibility conditions* that make the modal profile intrinsic to the object. The hybrid view only works in a static perspective about objects, according to Sidelle, but we should adopt a dynamic one.<sup>11</sup>

Valid as it may be, this important point changes the whole story of Sidelle’s own argument. If the defender of the hybrid view accepts the fact that we need to integrate a temporal dimension to our metaphysics of individuals, she will also quite plausibly reject identifying Socrates the human being with Socrateez, the aggregate of elements, as long as the two conventions individuate objects with divergent histories. If, say, Socrateez is an aggregate of physical elements, namely of particles, then he/it is rather a part of the composite spatiotemporal individual that is Socrates the human being. Of course, by hypothesis, the defender of the hybrid view will hold that we can have two modal conventions regarding the same object, so we should find a better example. But if she is sensitive to the point Sidelle makes, the realist will also refuse to accept any two conventions that give

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<sup>10</sup> Sidelle, “Modality and Objects,” 111.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Sidelle, “Modality and Objects,” 117.



us only temporarily overlapping objects. If this is so, and we are held to attach to the same object only modal conventions that trace an identical spatiotemporal itinerary, then there is no moment or period of time when (3) is true, that is, Socrates is not (or ceases to be) human, so Sidelle's argument breaks down.

What is more, I think Sidelle's requirement of always having to consider the persistence and possibility conditions of objects is unnaturally strong. Let me elaborate on this claim. First of all, it is not clear that we need necessary conditions for persistence through time; sufficient conditions appear to be able to do all the work that is normally required. Suppose, for instance, that there is a small accident at Socrates' birth that ends up with him having a small scar behind his left ear for all his life. Thus, *being the son of Sophroniscus and Phaenarete that has a scar behind his left ear* should suffice for identifying Socrates all through his lifetime, given that none of his male siblings had a similar scar. But this obviously reports a contingent fact about Socrates. Now, Sidelle would probably insist that this may work for singling out Socrates, but not for determining what kind of object he is. While this may appear to be a sensible philosophical requirement, it is not at all uncontroversial that it is indispensable for the realist. It may very well happen, as it often does, that the purportedly essential properties of the object (e. g., humanity, rationality, etc.) are not sufficient for individuating it and we should add contingent properties for singling it out, as in the example above. But this is not my concern here. The question is rather if necessary properties are needed at all in order to talk and think about an object and track it through time. As some externalists would probably hold, the temporal profile of an object may not be constrained by our knowledge of some necessary conditions for persistence.

Admittedly, this may look awkward for the realist. If two different conventions are really about the same individual with the same history, then it is natural to suppose that there must be some deep common fact that makes this work, even if we don't know what it is. But there is still a problem. Even if the defender of the hybrid view may be forced into admitting that some facts about persistence through time are not optional, there is still a long way to go before showing that this requirement should carry over to the modal case. Some theoretical input is needed at this point in order to better understand the implications of the claim that we need temporal and modal conditions for keeping track of objects. This claim regards two aspects: (a) a semantic dimension and (b) a metaphysical dimension. Arguably, Sidelle may be taken to defend the strong thesis that we need persistence and possibility conditions both at a semantic and at a metaphysical level. Now, in the temporal case, it seems plausible that a realist would be inclined to agree to a metaphysical constraint for persistence conditions,

but it is not clear at all that she should also be committed to the corresponding semantic constraint. All this has to do with the nature of the so-called referential terms, that is, proper names and natural kind terms. If the Kripke-Putnam theory or, more generally, some form of semantic externalism is right, then there are expressions in our language that are not tied to any type of descriptive content, including persistence and possibility conditions.<sup>12</sup> So, names and natural kind terms may provide us with a way of referring to objects without any corresponding criteria.

It is plausible that both the semantic and the metaphysical constraints break down in the modal case. The semantic commitment for modal conditions is straightforwardly dismissed if there are referential expressions that don't have a descriptive semantic content. The metaphysical commitment may be similarly dismissed if, with Kripke, one holds that we don't need criteria of transworld identification, but, *pace* Kripke, one also holds that there are no properties that should belong to an object in any possible situation. In order to support his claim, Sidelle needs a supplementary justification of why the realist cannot avoid commitment to essential properties, i.e., properties that an object must have in any possible scenario. At least from an epistemological point of view, there seems to be no such constraint on modal imagination, even for realists. Consequently, the hybrid view can be defended against Sidelle's arguments. To sum things up, the realist is entitled to hold that we may refer to and keep track of objects without being in possession of some necessary conditions for doing that. Although the hybrid-view realist may run into some metaphysical trouble for persistence in the actual world, no such trouble should incur in the case of possible worlds/scenarios. No particularity of a general realist standpoint seems to be able to prevent the realist from entertaining divergent possible scenarios concerning the possession of a certain property by a certain object.

What does this all mean for the argument from the insolvability of (apparent) modal disagreement? Well, it seems that in order to drive his point home, Sidelle needs too much of his own conventionalist perspective. He argues that we need persistence and modal conditions for keeping track of objects, but his claims can be countered both at a semantic and at a metaphysical level. If the Kripke-Putnam theory is correct, for instance, then we can refer to objects directly, without having to appeal to descriptive criteria. But perhaps we need persistence conditions for objecthood from a metaphysical standpoint. Even if this

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<sup>12</sup> Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* and Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7 (1975): 131-93 are the most important sources of Kripke-Putnam semantic theories.

is right, it is still unclear that this constraint should carry over to the modal case, that we need (semantic or metaphysical) criteria for identifying an object in different possible situations. Without a substantial conventionalist commitment, Sidelle's argument will not be able to get off the ground. Therefore, it doesn't establish that objects necessarily have intrinsic modal profiles.

In the following section, I will discuss a different approach to the critique of the separation between modal and empirical notions. This approach was propounded by Robert Brandom in his *Between Saying and Doing*. Brandom builds an argument for what he calls 'the Kant-Sellars thesis' – the claim that using empirical terms presupposes a grasp of modal distinctions – which we will now review.

### 3. The Kant-Sellars Thesis

Brandom formulates the Kant-Sellars thesis (KS from now on) in the following way: "The ability to use ordinary empirical descriptive terms such as 'green,' 'rigid,' and 'mass' already presupposes grasp of the kinds of properties and relations made explicit by modal vocabulary."<sup>13</sup> As its name says, KS has been defended in less explicit versions by Kant and Sellars, but Brandom articulates his own case to support it.

KS is related to Sidelle's claim that we need persistence and possibility conditions for objects (i.e., every object must have a modal profile), but it runs deeper: descriptive terms are inherently modal, thereby licensing or precluding various counterfactual claims about the properties they name. If we did not have a counterfactual inferential profile associated with these notions, we would not be able to use them to acquire knowledge about the world.

Brandom's argument *starts from the premise* that every autonomous discursive practice must have an observational vocabulary. *The second claim* is that those who engage in discursive practices must be able to distinguish between materially good and materially bad inferences ('material' meaning that the inferences contain non-logical terms in an essential manner). If we are not able to determine the character of some inferences wherein some term is involved, that term has no cognitive content. But (*third premise*) material inference is non-monotonic, which is to say it is defeasible by special circumstances. To take a simple example, I might be entitled to infer, based on the physical properties of the glass bottle in front of me, that if the bottle fell to the floor, it would break. Now, what Brandom says is that (obviously) this inference and similar ones don't

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<sup>13</sup> Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing*, 96-97.

function as formal inferences in logical systems. If I add another premise, thereby defining a circumstance where gravity is weaker, or the floor is actually made of a soft material, or what have you, then I cannot draw the wanted conclusion. Every material inference has its own host of ‘unless’es. If the bottle falls to the floor, it will break, unless gravity is much weaker, unless the floor is made of cardboard, unless... We can certainly have an idea of what these defeasors should look like, but we are certainly not able to provide a complete list thereof. *Fourth*, many of a subject’s beliefs may only be justified as conclusions of material inferences. *Finally*, in order to count as a discursive practitioner, one must be epistemically responsible, that is, minimally committed to justifying one’s beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

If our knowledge of the world works this way, then according to Brandom, it should yield an *updating problem*. Each time we modify our beliefs, this change may be relevant to the justification of every prior belief – it may act as a defeasor, or it may make the subject give up some premise she relied upon or a counter-defeasor. Each potential change may ruin a whole edifice of beliefs. The way out of the updating problem cannot be to review all of one’s beliefs every time there is a change of belief, as this is practically impossible. So, the solution, according to Brandom, is to associate with each belief a set of material inferences in relation to which that belief may act as a defeasor. But this yields, for each material inference, a set of defeasors that defines the counterfactual robustness of that inference.<sup>15</sup>

I recall at this point that I am interested in Brandom’s account as an argument against the idea that two people may agree about all the relevant empirical facts and disagree about the modal ones, which was a starting point for my doubts concerning the facticity of modal claims and disputes. Well, it certainly seems that Brandom’s account could be interpreted this way. For Brandom, the users of empirical vocabulary must have an idea of the counterfactual robustness of their ordinary descriptive terms. This in turn means that agreement about some empirical claim may be illusory if our two subjects disagree about all or most of the related counterfactual claims.

However, I don’t think that Brandom’s account vindicates an objective notion of possibility, i.e. metaphysical possibility, and I don’t think it sets out to do that. Let me elaborate on these claims. I will use a short critical assessment by Stjernberg that raises some legitimate doubts about Brandom’s argument for KS.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing*, 106–08 for the detailed argument.

<sup>15</sup> See Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing*, 108–09.

<sup>16</sup> Fredrik Stjernberg, “Brandom’s Five-Step Program for Modal Health,” in *Proceedings of the Workshop on Bob Brandom’s Recent Philosophy of Language: Towards an Analytic*

The overarching idea is that the account is sketchy, which is to say it needs to be developed so that it explains adequately the way the updating process works, most notably the way we manage to delineate and use counterfactual profiles for empirical notions. This is correct, but we may suppose that Brandom's sketch could be developed into a full-fledged account of the modal basis of our knowledge, as there is no manifest contradiction or conceptual tension therein. Now, one of Stjernberg's criticisms that elaborates on the perceived sketchiness of Brandom's account is that his line of reasoning is not strong enough to support the strong conclusion that *we must know roughly the same counterfactuals if we are to count as epistemically responsible agents*.<sup>17</sup> Stjernberg claims that this conclusion is desirable for Brandom and that in order to be able to support it, we also need to show that "the use of a particular modal or counterfactual statement is justified, that there is some way to distinguish correct from incorrect use."<sup>18</sup> In other words, in order to be entitled to draw the strong conclusion from Brandom's argument, we need some supplementary epistemological premise that reports on our ability to get a grip on objective possibility (i.e., something that justifies ontological realism about modality).

I disagree with Stjernberg that the strong reading is the desirable conclusion of Brandom's argument. If we frame the argument in the context of Brandom's theory of modality, it appears that Brandom doesn't need the strong version; moreover, it seems to run counter to his basic tenets. In Brandom's view, KS should be interpreted in accordance with the idea that

the expressive role characteristic of alethic modal vocabulary is to make explicit semantic or conceptual connections and commitments that are already implicit in the use of ordinary (apparently) non-modal empirical vocabulary.<sup>19</sup>

So, it must be emphasized that Brandom sees modality as a fundamentally conceptual matter: our modal assertions are actually statements of rules concerning concept use. The idea of a *correct* use of modal and counterfactual notions, insofar as it supposedly tracks some *real*, objective possibility, is secondary at best. That is why Stjernberg's weak reading of Brandom's argument – with the conclusion that "we must be in agreement on some counterfactuals, if we

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*Pragmatism*, eds. Cristina Amoretti, Carlo Penco and Federico Pitto (Genoa: University of Genoa, Department of Philosophy, 2009), 18–22.

<sup>17</sup> Stjernberg, "Brandom's Five-Step Program," 21.

<sup>18</sup> Stjernberg, "Brandom's Five-Step Program," 21.

<sup>19</sup> Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing*, 99.

are to see each other as epistemically responsible and hence discursive creatures”<sup>20</sup> – seems more appropriate.

However, I agree with Stjernberg that Brandom’s argument doesn’t discriminate between a correct and an incorrect use of counterfactuals; consequently, it does not (because it cannot) articulate a robust concept of metaphysical modality. But I don’t regard this as a shortcoming of Brandom’s account, for reasons just given.

In a nutshell, the conclusion of this section is as follows. If KS is correct, then there cannot be empirical agreement and modal disagreement on strongly related matters. But KS is subtended by a conceptualist/expressivist perspective of modality. Our modal assertions articulate implicit rules concerning the structure and use of our concepts. A question remains however: couldn’t something like KS (some version of the no-separation idea) be made to work in the framework of ontological realism about modality? After all, realists such as Williamson and Hale are supporters of the intertwining of the modal and the non-modal.<sup>21</sup>

I am fairly sceptical about the prospects of such an endeavour. While I don’t have a well-developed argument in support of my scepticism, I see very little ground to allow one to uphold KS outside a broadly Kantian framework. A more detailed realist account of the fusion and interplay of the empirical and the modal would be needed. For instance, Hale makes the no-separation idea a staple of his theory of modality, but he provides very little in the way of development and illustration of this unity. Remember how Brandom’s account works. We have modal concepts because we have rules for our concepts. That is why the updating problem is so important. Change occurs not only in the realm of ordinary beliefs; it may also affect the rules. This is where ‘reality’ appears to produce an effect on our modal faculty, whatever we take that to be. Now, for the conceptualist (in a broad sense) a change in our modal views *just is* a change in the rules, that is, a change in the structure of our ordinary concepts. But the ontological realist about modality would want to maintain that there are modal facts, which should also make her want to resist admitting that a change in our modal views *always* amounts to a change in the structure of our ordinary concepts. I see this as a strong reason for the realist to reject the no-separation idea, at least as it has been described in this paper.

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<sup>20</sup> Stjernberg, “Brandom’s Five-Step Program,” 20.

<sup>21</sup> See Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 137, and Bob Hale, *Necessary Beings: an Essay on Ontology, Modality, and the Relations Between Them* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

#### 4. Conclusion

There may be some substance to the no-separation thesis – perhaps there is a modal dimension to our ordinary statements, and modal disagreement should be reflected in empirical disagreement. However, if (some of) Sidelle's and Brandom's views are right, modal disagreement has a theoretical nature: we disagree about the confines of objecthood or the definition of a notion. If we take conventionalism out of Sidelle's argument, e. g., if we try to articulate it in a Kripke-Putnam semantic framework or if we try to make epistemological sense, so to say, from our modal scenarios, we see that the argument breaks down. Brandom's approach is not adequate for supporting ontologically robust concepts of modality. The arguments of this paper may cause significant distress for the modal rationalist, but they should not bring her an irreparable defeat. The other party must be heard, but this means that more should be done in order to describe and explain the link between the a priori principles of modal knowledge and the purportedly mind-independent modal reality. More precisely, some way of deciding satisfactorily between the opposing sides of a substantial modal dispute must be discussed and theorized. Otherwise, concerns about the status of modal facts and modal knowledge may indeed prove defeating for principle-based accounts of modality. My sceptically motivated paper ends with this invitation.<sup>22</sup>

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## **DISCUSSION NOTES/ DEBATE**



# PHENOMENAL CONSERVATISM, REFLECTION AND SELF-DEFEAT

Julien BEILLARD

ABSTRACT: Huemer defends phenomenal conservatism (PC) and also the further claim that belief in any rival theory is self-defeating (SD). Here I construct a dilemma for his position: either PC and SD are incompatible, or belief in PC is itself self-defeating. I take these considerations to suggest a better self-defeat argument for (belief in) PC and a strong form of internalism.

KEYWORDS: epistemology, phenomenal conservatism, self-defeat, appearances, internalism, externalism

## 1. Introduction

Michael Huemer defends phenomenal conservatism:

(PC) If it appears to S that  $p$  then, in the absence of defeaters, S has justification for believing that  $p$ .<sup>1</sup>

And a striking further claim, which he takes to encourage belief in PC:

(SD) If PC is inconsistent with  $t$ , the belief that  $t$  is self-defeating.

Here I argue that Huemer's position generates a dilemma: either PC is incompatible with SD or belief in PC is itself self-defeating. I take these considerations to suggest a better self-defeat argument for (belief in) PC and a strong form of internalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Huemer typically identifies PC with the weaker principle that appearances in the absence of defeaters provide "some degree of justification" ("Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007): 30). He wants to avoid the implausible implication that a "weak and wavering appearance" might confer "full justification" ("Phenomenal Conservatism and the Internalist Intuition," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (2006): 157 n5). Another way to avoid it would be to treat these special properties of appearances as defeaters. In any case, the appearances discussed here need not have any of these properties. And when I say that a belief is "justified" I mean that it is *fully* justified.

## 2. SD and Strong Internalism

A few words about how PC and SD are to be understood. Appearances are conscious states with propositional contents (or objects of such states) that produce inclinations to belief. Defeaters are things that deprive beliefs of justification.<sup>2</sup> For now, I simply note that Huemer takes defeaters to be “grounds for doubting that one knows.”<sup>3</sup> And, for now, I will assume a strong form of internalism:

S has grounds for attitude A with respect to *p* only if it appears to S that something makes A rational for S with respect to *p*.

So, on this interpretation, PC suggests an intuitively appealing account of justified belief and it may enable us to counter arguments for skepticism.<sup>4</sup>

These considerations impose a very strong condition on self-defeating belief:

S's belief that *p* is self-defeating only if, (at least partly) in virtue of S's belief that *p*, it appears to S that something makes it rational for S to doubt that S knows that *p*.

On this interpretation, then, SD implies that it appears to Huemer's opponents that they have reasons for doubting that their own beliefs about justification count as knowledge. Not surprisingly, his argument for SD does not establish this false claim. But it is worth considering why exactly the argument fails (on this interpretation). The core of the self-defeat argument runs as follows:

(P<sub>1</sub>) Beliefs are based only on appearances.

(P<sub>2</sub>) Justified beliefs are based on their justifiers.

(C/SD) If PC is inconsistent with *t*, the belief that *t* is self-defeating.

And Huemer takes this argument to encourage belief in PC.

Now it does seem that there is a problem in this vicinity for Huemer's opponents. Rival theories imply that appearances alone can never justify beliefs.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, if there is nothing more to say about the nature of defeat, PC threatens to collapse into the empty claim that beliefs are justified if nothing makes them unjustified. (And it does collapse if S believes that *p* only if it appears to S that *p*.)

<sup>3</sup> Michael Huemer, “Phenomenal Conservatism and Self-Defeat: A Reply to DePoe,” *Philosophical Studies* 156 (2011): 9.

<sup>4</sup> The implication depends on two assumptions: (1) if it appears to S that *p* and S believes that *p* on that basis then, in the absence of defeaters, the fact that it appears to S that *p* is what justifies S's belief that *p*, and (2) a belief is justified if the subject bases the belief on something that justifies the belief. I accept (1) and (2) throughout this discussion.

Plausibly, though, all relevant beliefs – any that, intuitively, might count as justified beliefs – are based only on appearances. Only some set of appearances could act as the conscious cause of any belief.<sup>5</sup> So  $P_1$  is the claim that any relevant beliefs are (relevantly) based only on appearances. And  $P_2$  is the claim that the basis of a justified belief is what justifies it. This too seems plausible. Granting these claims, we may infer that belief in a rival theory is based on something that justifies the belief only if the theory is not true.

These considerations may seem to support SD and, given some further assumptions, they may also seem to support the further conclusion that belief in PC is justified.<sup>6</sup> But this cannot be right. Imagine that I believe a simple reliabilist theory:

(R) A belief is justified if and only if it was reliably caused.<sup>7</sup>

Does the self-defeat argument succeed against my belief in R? No. At most,  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  imply that *if* R is true my belief in R is unjustified (and perhaps self-defeating). But SD implies that my belief *is* unjustified. Suppose, however, that PC is true rather than R. Then my belief might be justified. I might believe R because it appears to me that R is true, and it might not appear to me that anything makes it doubtful that I know R. For example, it might not appear to me that there is any reason to doubt that my belief is reliably caused. Many of Huemer's opponents must be in this kind of epistemic situation. So in the actual world, at least, PC and SD are incompatible. PC implies that certain (token) beliefs about justification are justified, whereas SD implies that these same beliefs are *not* justified, in virtue of defeating themselves.

Suppose instead that R is true. Would my belief in R be self-defeating in that case? Maybe, but the self-defeat argument gives no support to that conclusion. R and  $P_2$  are incompatible, since R implies that justified beliefs need

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<sup>5</sup> So  $P_1$  does not imply that beliefs have no other causes. It is also worth noting that, on this interpretation,  $P_1$  does not imply that the subject *consciously bases* her belief on some set of appearances – that she is conscious *of* taking the belief to be justified in virtue of a conscious state that causes the belief.

<sup>6</sup> These further assumptions are that (1) a belief that is (or would be) unjustified if it is (or were) true is unjustified, (2) there is some theory of justification such that we can be justified in believing that theory and (3) belief in PC is not self-defeating. I will later challenge both (1) and (3).

<sup>7</sup> So as to ensure that R and PC are inconsistent, we may stipulate that reliably caused beliefs need not always be beliefs appropriately based on appearances in the absence of defeaters. Perhaps a reliably caused belief is a belief caused by a mental faculty with a strong tendency to produce true beliefs. But it makes no difference to my argument how exactly reliability should be understood.

not be *based* on anything (in the relevant sense). Indeed, P<sub>2</sub> seems to be flatly incoherent, if R is true. How could any belief be ‘based’ on the fact that it was reliably caused? Moreover, R implies that beliefs are *unjustified* only if they are *not* reliably caused, but P<sub>1</sub> and P<sub>2</sub> say nothing about the causes of any belief. At most, they imply that, if R were true, my belief in R would fail to meet a merely possible condition on justified beliefs. So on the present interpretation Huemer’s self-defeat argument is badly defective.

### 3. Strong Internalism or Weak Internalism?

My main conclusion in the last section was that Huemer’s self-defeat argument is unsound under PC and strong internalism. Thus, if the argument is meant to establish that belief in PC *and* strong internalism is rational, or more rational than belief in any rival theory, it seems that the argument fails on its own terms.<sup>8</sup> Then again, the terms are unclear. Huemer often seems to endorse strong internalism. For example, it may be implied by the “central internalist intuition about justification” that he takes to support PC, for example:

There cannot be a pair of cases in which everything seems to a subject to be the same in all epistemically relevant respects, and yet the subject ought, rationally, to take different doxastic attitudes in the two cases.<sup>9</sup>

Notice a scope ambiguity in this passage, though. Cases C and C\* might be taken to “seem the same” to subject S if and only if they meet a strong internalist condition:

For any property P such that P *appears to S to be* an epistemic property, it appears to S that C and C\* are identical with respect to P.

Or a weaker internalist condition:

For any property P such that P *is* an epistemic property, it appears to S that C and C\* are identical with respect to P.

If PC encodes the weaker form of internalism, and an associated conception of defeat, there could be defeaters for a belief when it appears to the subject that she knows its content. Then the objection to the self-defeat argument urged in the last section fails.

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, under PC and strong internalism, people might be justified in believing that the self-defeat argument justifies them in believing PC and strong internalism. But presumably Huemer does not take his own belief that the argument justifies his belief in PC to depend on his own confusion or ignorance!

<sup>9</sup> Huemer, “Phenomenal Conservatism and the Internalist Intuition,” 151.

It is just not clear how Huemer intends to characterize defeaters. He rejects externalism because he takes it to imply that a person could correctly report on a rational attitude by means of an absurd speech:

I believe that *p* for no apparent reason.<sup>10</sup>

Presumably we are meant to infer that strong internalism holds for justifiers. And the internalist intuition implies that one of these two forms of internalism must hold for any conditions that determine rational attitudes. But Huemer also appeals to a weak internalist conception of defeat, at times:

The believer's merely *thinking* that the belief that *P* coheres with rest of his system of beliefs and appearances would not prevent his belief that *P* from being defeated, provided that the principle governing when a belief's justification is defeated adverts to *actual* coherence relations (or lack thereof).<sup>11</sup>

And yet, if actual incoherence alone defeats beliefs, an equally absurd (Moore-paradoxical) speech could be a correct report of a rational attitude:

I believe that my belief that *q* is justified, but my belief that *q* is not justified.

In dealing with some objections to the self-defeat argument, at any rate, Huemer appeals to the weaker form of internalism. DePaul worries that even under PC beliefs are not based on their justifiers: we do not believe things on the basis of appearances and the absence of defeaters.<sup>12</sup> Huemer replies that their absence is a mere "requirement" on justified beliefs under PC whereas, under rival theories, things over and above appearances figure in the purported "sources" of justification.<sup>13</sup> Obviously, though, it might not *appear* to the proponent of R that reliable causation is a justifier rather than a mere requirement.

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<sup>10</sup> Huemer, "Phenomenal Conservatism and the Internalist Intuition," 150, Huemer, "Reply to DePoe," 11.

<sup>11</sup> Huemer, "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007): 156.

<sup>12</sup> Michael DePaul, "Phenomenal Conservatism and Self-Defeat", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78 (2009): 206.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Huemer, "Apology of a Modest Intuitionist," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78 (2009): 228. As further evidence for my interpretation of Huemer's strategy, consider the following passage:

The alternative epistemological *theories* against which I argue cannot escape self-defeat in this way. Reliabilism, for example, *holds* that the reliability of one's belief-forming mechanism is responsible for one's having justification for a given proposition; this reliability *is not* the mere absence of a condition that would interfere with one's having justification (Huemer, "Apology of a Modest Intuitionist," 228, *italics mine*).

Mizrahi constructs rival self-defeat arguments and asks why we should not accept one of these others rather than Huemer's argument for belief in PC.<sup>14</sup> Huemer claims that any rival argument has a "false and implausible" premise, for instance the premise that beliefs are based on externalist evidence. Consider "some reasonable candidate for justified belief, say the belief that  $2 + 1 = 3$ ," and "you are just going to find it plausible that it is based on the appearance that  $2 + 1 = 3$ ".<sup>15</sup> But it would be absurd for Huemer to claim that, when Mizrahi was writing his paper, it *already* appeared to him that every other theory about the basis of belief was false and implausible, or less plausible than P1. (He is not accusing all of his opponents of bad faith, I assume.)

In these replies, Huemer appears to be appealing to claims about how things would appear to an otherwise fully rational thinker who believed some rival theory: *she* would have grounds for doubting that she knew the theory, even if it does not appear to some actual proponents of rival theories that there is any reason for doubt. And he takes these considerations to imply SD. In the next section, I consider a self-defeat argument along these lines. I conclude that it may succeed, but only if the same kind of argument makes it self-defeating to believe PC (or to believe that the self-defeat argument is a reason for believing PC).

#### 4. SD and Weak Internalism

Consider a weak internalist condition on grounds:

S has grounds for attitude A with respect to  $p$  only if it appears to S that  $q$  and its appearing to S that  $q$  makes A rational for S with respect to  $p$ .

And a corresponding condition on self-defeating belief:

S's belief that  $p$  is self-defeating only if (at least partly) in virtue of S's belief that  $p$ , it appears to S that  $q$  and its appearing to S that  $q$  makes it doubtful that S knows that  $p$ .

These conditions invoke objective rational relations that may not make any difference to how things appear to a given subject. We might think of these relations in terms of the attitudes of an ideal thinker. Suppose that it appears to an

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These do not seem to be claims about what *reliabilists* hold, or how things actually appear to them. Instead, they seem to be claims about conceptual or metaphysical facts that might make no difference to the phenomenology of his opponents.

<sup>14</sup> Moti Mizrahi, "Phenomenal Conservatism, Justification and Self-Defeat," *Logos & Episteme* 5 (214): 103-110.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Huemer, "Alternative Self-Defeat Arguments: A Reply to Mizrahi," *Logos & Episteme* 5 (2014): 227.



actual subject that  $q$ . Then its appearing to  $S$  that  $q$  will (objectively) make it doubtful that  $S$  knows that  $p$  if and only if, for some otherwise fully rational thinker  $T$  in a situation relevantly similar to the situation of  $S$ , it appears to  $T$  that its appearing that  $q$  makes it doubtful that  $T$  knows that  $p$ .

Needless to say, this is just a sketch of a kind of internalism about justification. But I hope that the basic idea is clear enough for our purposes. The idea is that the subject may not be fully (consciously) aware of the epistemic significance of the facts about how things appear to her. Some appearance or group of appearances that figures in her phenomenology may in fact make it doubtful that some belief of hers is knowledge even though it does not appear to her that she has any reason for doubt. This is still an internalist position, insofar as the facts about justified belief or rational attitudes more generally are always supervenient on appearances.

Imagine an ideally rational proponent of  $R$ : she is as rational as anyone who believed  $R$  could be. Belief in  $R$  is self-defeating under weak internalism if it would appear to her that something made it doubtful that her belief in  $R$  was an item of knowledge. The first phase of the self-defeat argument might then be taken to represent grounds for doubt that the ideal thinker would acquire, on reflection. Her reasoning might be represented roughly as follows:

( $P_1^*$ ) It appears to her that beliefs are based only on appearances.

( $P_2^*$ ) It appears to her that justified beliefs are based on their justifiers.

( $SD^*$ ) It appears to her that, if  $R$  is true, her belief in  $R$  is unjustified.

$SD^*$  might well imply  $SD$ , and the final conclusion that belief in  $PC$  is justified. The self-defeat argument has some force on this interpretation.

$P_1^*$  is plausible. Perhaps it appears to me that I base some belief on a memory. But will it not appear to me, on further reflection, that my belief is really based on various appearances? It appears to me that I remember, that my memories are probably veridical, and so on. Even if I take my belief to be based on acquaintance, I should allow that acquaintance serves as a basis only when it is (or causes) some relevant kind of appearance.<sup>16</sup> An ideal thinker might well accept this line of thought, anyway.  $P_2^*$  is also plausible. Perhaps some of my unreflective beliefs are justified though it does not appear to me that anything justifies them. (Because it does not appear to me that I have these beliefs or it does not occur to

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<sup>16</sup> Here my point is that acquaintance does not ensure that the subject knows anything about the object of her awareness, unless the object is a mere appearance. Huemer says similar things about acquaintance ("Reply to DePoe," 1-13).

me to consider their epistemic status.<sup>17</sup>) Plausibly, though, any justified *reflective* belief of mine appears to me to be justified. It appears to me that there is a reason for my belief, and that I *have* a reason – and, therefore, that I base my belief on its justifier.

An ideal thinker might infer (from P<sub>1</sub>) that her belief in R is based only on appearances and (from R) that reliable causation justifies any justified belief. Then she might infer that her belief is not based on its justifier and (from P<sub>2</sub>) that her belief in R cannot be both true and justified. In other words, *her* reason for believing R, consisting merely in some set of appearances, could not appear to her to be *the* reason, given her belief in R. She would then have to give up her belief, on pain of having to make an absurd (Moore-paradoxical) speech:

I believe R for a *merely* apparent reason.

Since she would now have grounds for doubting that she knows R, generated in part by her belief in R, her belief in R turns out to be self-defeating. If the rational attitude of any proponent of R is hers, belief in R is always self-defeating. Generalizing, it does seem that an argument along these lines supports SD.

But the argument is not decisive. Why must an ideal proponent of R believe that reliable causation justifies her belief? Perhaps she takes it to be a mere requirement on justification: she thinks that mere appearances are justifiers, but only when those appearances (or beliefs based on them) are reliably caused. Perhaps it appears to her that R is true, and that she bases her belief in R on that appearance, and it also appears to her that the faculties or processes that make it appear to her that R is true are reliable, and that the faculties that make it appear to her that those faculties are reliable are themselves reliable, and so on. She does not seem to be under any rational pressure to doubt that her belief could be both true and justified.

But this second scenario generates a different problem. Notice that the nature of an apparent reason – or its apparent nature – depends on the reflective state of the ideal thinker. When she initially reflects, it may appear to her that there is a reason for her belief in R given merely that it appears to her that some appearance justifies it. But when she reflects further, in light of her belief that

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<sup>17</sup> I agree with Huemer that a statement such as ‘I believe that *p* for no apparent reason’ could not be a correct report of a rational state of mind. But although the report is irrational, what is reported need not be. If the subject is not even aware of having a certain belief, or if she is aware of having it but fails to reflect on its epistemic status, she need not be aware of anything that appears to her to justify the belief. (And in that case she is not in a position to report on her epistemic situation with respect to that belief.)

reliable causation *enables* some appearances to act as justifiers, it appears to her that there is a reason for her belief in R only if it also appears to her that the enabling condition holds.

DePaul was right to claim that people do not always base their justified beliefs on appearances and the absence of defeaters. Still, a rational thinker who believes that there are enabling conditions (or other 'mere requirements' on justified belief) will base *some* of her reflective beliefs in part on the *apparent* absence of defeaters – the apparent presence of any enabling conditions, for example. If an ideal thinker believes that her belief in R is justified, she believes that some set of appearances is enabled to act as a justifier for that belief. And she believes this only if she believes

(FR) Some of my faculties are reliable.

How could she believe FR, though?

Perhaps it appears to her that FR is true, and that there is no defeater for her belief in FR. On reflection, she will have to believe that something enables this pair of appearances to justify her belief in FR. She might believe *that* because it appears to her that the pair is enabled, and that something enables *that* appearance, and so on ad infinitum. But why should she believe that any facts about how things appear to her are ever enabled to justify any belief of hers?

If the reason is dependent on a prior belief in FR itself, she relies on an inference that appears to her to be viciously circular (because it is). If she does not rely on a prior belief in FR, she relies on an inference that appears to her to be invalid (because it is). After all, R implies that the mere fact that it *appears* to her that some of her faculties of hers are reliable does not ensure the sheer objective fact that some of her faculties are reliable. And R implies that the first fact does not count rationally in favor of any belief, to any degree, in the absence of the second. So if she takes facts about how things appear to her to make FR certain or merely probable or plausible, without yet believing FR, she bases her belief in FR on facts that she herself is bound to regard as being simply irrelevant to the epistemic status of any belief.

The same problem arises if she takes herself to have some purely a priori reason for believing FR. She might believe that there is some epistemic norm to the effect that belief in FR is permissible or obligatory, for example, or that it would be self-defeating not to believe FR. But if she believes that such a belief justifies her belief in FR, she relies on an inference that appears to her to be viciously circular or invalid. Given her belief in P<sub>1</sub> this belief about her reason for believing FR rationally commits her to a further belief: the belief that the mere fact that some (apparently) true proposition *appears* to her to justify her belief in

FR really does justify that belief, regardless of any objective facts about causation. But given her belief in R, this further belief will appear to her to be unjustified, unless she already believes FR.

So an ideal thinker might well have grounds for doubting that she knew FR and, given her belief in R, these would also appear to her to be grounds for doubting that she knew R. Since these grounds would be generated in part by her belief in R, the belief would be self-defeating. If the rational attitude of any proponent of R is the attitude that she would have in his epistemic situation, belief in R is self-defeating. And it seems that all rival theories are similar to theory R in this respect. If they are, SD seems plausible under weak internalism.

There are ways to resist this argument, of course. I will not try to nail down its conclusion. In fact, I will argue shortly that proponents of PC should reject it. But I want to pause here to forestall a possible misunderstanding. It may be objected that the argument begs the question insofar as it depends on internalist intuitions about rational attitudes. In effect, the argument appeals to some ideal of reflective equilibrium. And yet, under R or some other forms of externalism, there seems to be no such constraint on the rational attitudes. Perhaps an ideally rational thinker is simply one whose cognitive faculties always produce true beliefs.

First of all, it seems fair to reply that it is precisely this implication (or seeming implication) that makes externalism so counter-intuitive. So the argument may be understood as an appeal to widely shared pre-theoretical intuitions or, for that matter, a shared understanding of rationality or justification. (If the very idea of justification is an internalist idea, any correct objection to externalism will 'beg the question' in some unobjectionable sense.) After all, the behavior of externalists suggests that they too accept that reflective equilibrium is a rational ideal. In arguing for externalism, they regularly appeal to considerations of coherence. Moreover, in *arguing* for externalism, or defending it against objections, they appear to take for granted that their own belief in externalism is subject to some kind of 'internalist' norm.<sup>18</sup>

In any case, I am mainly interested here in the question of whether those of us who are inclined to grant the internalist intuitions that Huemer cites in support

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<sup>18</sup> Imagine an externalist who reports that, although the self-defeat argument appears to her to prove that her own epistemological beliefs are unjustified, it appears to her that *that* fact makes no difference to the rational status of her belief in externalism. Perhaps she adds that the fact that the first fact appears to her to make no difference also appears to her to make no difference. Even most externalists will surely have to agree that this line of thought does not seem to be a rational response to the self-defeat argument.

of PC can rationally accept the self-defeat argument. Even if proponents of rival theories may legitimately charge that this version of the argument begs the question, this issue can be set aside. What I hope to establish here is not that belief in any rival theory is self-defeating, or that it is not, but instead that – given these basic internalist intuitions – it is self-defeating to *believe on the basis of that argument* that belief in any rival theory is self-defeating. The weak internalist self-defeat argument may be sound, but phenomenal conservatives cannot make use of this argument without self-defeat. In the next section I develop my argument for this conclusion, and suggest a better self-defeat argument for (belief in) PC and strong internalism.

### 5. A Better Self-Defeat Argument

Earlier I suggested that the weak internalist self-defeat argument against belief in theory R can be generalized. For under any rival theory, justification depends on something over and above all facts about how things appear to the subject – and, crucially, all facts about the apparent epistemic significance of those facts. Inevitably, an ideal proponent of any rival theory will find on reflection that any apparent reason for her belief in that theory is not the (or a) real or adequate reason, and this will appear to her to make it doubtful that she knows the theory.

Notice that, if this reasoning is sound, it holds not only for belief in any externalist theory but also for belief in any theory other than *strong internalist PC* (i.e., the conjunction of PC and the strong internalist condition on grounds). Thus, imagine an ideal proponent of PC and weak internalism. She wonders what justifies her belief in PC. Given her belief in weak internalism, she believes that her belief in PC is justified only if it would not appear to an ideal thinker in her epistemic situation that anything made it doubtful that her belief in PC was an item of knowledge. On reflection, her belief will appear to her to be based on a merely apparent reason: it will appear to her that, in holding the belief, she is at least rationally committed to an inference that is either viciously circular or invalid.

Perhaps it does not appear to her that she has any reason for doubting that her belief in PC is an item of knowledge, and it appears to her that she *is* an ideal thinker. But now, if she bases her belief in PC on these facts about how things appear to her – inferring that it would not appear to an ideal thinker that anything made it doubtful that her belief in PC was knowledge – without relying on a prior belief in PC, it will appear to her that the inference is invalid. (It obviously is invalid.) But if instead she does rely on some prior belief in PC, the inference will appear to her to be viciously circular.

Her belief that she is justified in believing PC is itself justified only if she is justified in believing

(IT) I am an ideal thinker.

And it seems that, under weak internalism, the epistemic situation of the ideal phenomenal conservative with respect to IT is no better than that of the ideal reliabilist with respect to FR. If she takes herself to believe IT simply because it appears to her that IT is true, or it appears to her that it appears to her that IT is true in the absence of defeaters, she bases her belief on something that she herself has no reason to regard as a *real* reason. And if she takes some such set of appearances to constitute a real reason for her belief in IT, such that her belief in PC appears to her even on epistemological reflection to be based on a real reason, she is rationally committed to PC and strong internalism. Since an ideal thinker would appreciate this problem, it seems that an ideal proponent of PC would have to accept strong internalism. But then she would also have to reject SD, and the weak internalist self-defeat argument sketched in the last section.

I take these considerations to suggest a better self-defeat argument for (belief in) strong internalist PC. Unlike Huemer's argument, mine does not aim to establish that belief in any rival theory is self-defeating but rather that such a belief will *become* self-defeating if the subject accepts certain intuitions and then reflects properly on the epistemic status of her own beliefs about justified belief. Once she reflects, she will have strong internalist grounds for doubting that her belief in the rival theory is an item of knowledge, generated in part by that same belief of hers, although she may be justified in holding that belief if she never reflects on its epistemic status (or if she reflects improperly). So in that respect my position is weaker than his. But, unlike his argument, mine aims to establish that belief in any rival theory *including* belief in a weak(er) internalist formulation of PC itself will become self-defeating in that case. So in that respect my position is stronger than his.

The argument may be stated roughly as follows:

(P1) Beliefs are based only on appearances.

(P2) Justified beliefs are based on their justifiers.

(SD\*) If strong internalist PC is inconsistent with  $t$ , the belief that  $t$  becomes self-defeating when the subject reflects properly on the epistemic status of her belief (and believes that the apparent reasons for her own justified beliefs must be real reasons).

The argument is not open to the objections urged earlier against other versions of the self-defeat argument, and it seems to fit well with pre-theoretical

intuitions. It seems intuitively that many people are justified in believing propositions inconsistent with PC (or strong internalism or strong internalist PC). It seems that many externalists are justified in rejecting PC or strong internalist PC. Of course, it may be that these things seem intuitively to be true only to those of us who do accept these internalist intuitions. Again, I am not trying to argue that everyone must share these intuitions, or even that everyone will have to accept them on reflection, or that this version of the self-defeat argument should persuade externalists. Indeed, these kinds of claims are at odds with the permissive pre-theoretical intuitions that I am invoking. So in that respect also, my position is significantly weaker than Huemer's.

Instead, I claim that those of us who share the intuitions that make PC an appealing principle must reject his self-defeat argument, on pain of incoherence or self-defeat, but that we may accept a somewhat different argument that *we* may rationally take to count against belief in any theory other than strong internalist PC. We can coherently believe, on reflection, that our own beliefs about justification are themselves justified in just the way that, given those same beliefs, we take countless mundane beliefs are justified. It appears to us that PC is true. It appears to us that we believe PC because it appears to us that PC is true in the absence of defeaters, and it appears to us that all of these appearances are just the kinds of things that justify most of our beliefs. We can coherently believe – and, crucially, *believe* ourselves to coherently believe – that no other theory of justification can be coherently believed.





# EXPLANATIONISM, SUPER-EXPLANATIONISM, ECCLECTIC EXPLANATIONISM: PERSISTENT PROBLEMS ON BOTH SIDES

T. Ryan BYERLY, Kraig MARTIN

**ABSTRACT:** We argue that explanationist views in epistemology continue to face persistent challenges to both their necessity and their sufficiency. This is so despite arguments offered by Kevin McCain in a paper recently published in this journal which attempt to show otherwise. We highlight ways in which McCain's attempted solutions to problems we had previously raised go awry, while also presenting a novel challenge for all contemporary explanationist views.

**KEYWORDS:** evidentialism, explanationism, explanatory circularity, logical entailment, probability, Kevin McCain

The conversation representing renewed interest in explanationist accounts of epistemic justification continues to grow.<sup>1</sup> In a previous contribution to this conversation,<sup>2</sup> we argued that explanationist views face problems on both sides: the conditions they offer for epistemic justification are neither necessary nor sufficient. Kevin McCain<sup>3</sup> has recently responded to us in this journal, arguing that the problems we raise can be overcome. Here we explain why his responses fail. McCain's response to the problem we raise concerning the sufficiency of explanationism can be shown to fail by examining important components of our

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<sup>1</sup> T. Ryan Byerly, "Explanationism and Justified Beliefs About the Future," *Erkenntnis* 78, 1 (2013): 229-243, T. Ryan Byerly and Kraig Martin, "Problems for Explanationism on Both Sides," *Erkenntnis* 80, 4 (2014): 773-791, doi:10.1007/s10670-014-9673-2, Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, "Evidence," *Epistemology: New Essays*, ed. Quentin Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Kevin McCain, "Evidentialism, Explanationism, and Beliefs About the Future," *Erkenntnis* 79, 1 (2014): 99-109, Kevin McCain, *Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification* (London: Routledge, 2014), Kevin McCain, "Explanationism: Defended on All Sides," *Logos & Episteme: An International Journal of Epistemology* VI, 3 (2015): 333-349, Ted Poston, *Reason and Explanation: A Defense of Explanatory Coherentism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Byerly and Martin, "Problems for Explanationism."

<sup>3</sup> McCain, "Explanationism: Defended."

previous work on the topic that he has overlooked. McCain's response to the problem we raise concerning the necessity of explanationism is more interesting, as it involves the articulation of a novel version of explanationism we call Super-Explanationism. We argue, however, that even if Super-Explanationism could defuse the problem we had initially raised concerning the necessity of explanationism, it faces a distinct problem concerning its necessity. Moreover, even a new explanationist view we propose here called Ecclectic Explanationism, which attempts to combine the strengths of Super-Explanationism with the strengths of previous explanationist theories, still faces an important objection to its necessity. Indeed, the objection we raise to the necessity of Ecclectic Explanationism threatens all versions of explanationism we know of. Given these results, we conclude that the explanationist family of views continues to face persistent problems on both sides.

### 1. Challenging the Sufficiency of Explanationism

While there are various versions of explanationism on offer today, one commitment shared in common between them is the following claim: if a proposition  $p$  is the best available explanation for a subject  $S$ 's evidence, and  $p$  is a good explanation for that evidence, then  $S$  is justified in believing  $p$ . This commitment is affirmed for example by both the version of explanationism defended by McCain in his recent book,<sup>4</sup> as well as the revised Super-Explanationist view he defends in this journal (more on this view below). In our "Problems for Explanationism on Both Sides," we challenged this commitment, arguing that there are cases where a proposition  $p$  is the best available explanation for a subject  $S$ 's evidence, and  $p$  is a good explanation of this evidence, but  $S$  is not justified in believing  $p$  because  $S$  has reason to think there may well be relevant evidence concerning what explains his current evidence that is not currently available.

Here is the case we originally offered to support this contention:

Imagine that Sally is the lead detective on an investigation of a burglary. She typically uses an eight-step investigative procedure for crimes of this sort and this procedure involves gathering and analyzing multiple kinds of evidence – physical evidences, forensic evidences, testimonial evidences, psychological evidences, circumstantial evidences, and so on. Sally is now mid-way through her investigative procedure, having completed four of the eight steps. She has gathered and analyzed the appropriate evidence for these four steps, but has not yet gathered or analyzed evidence that may or may not arise during the final four

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<sup>4</sup> McCain, *Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification*, 117.

steps. The list of suspects with which Sally began has been narrowed, and there is one very promising suspect in particular named Jeremy. In fact, the claim <Jeremy committed the burglary> (call this the Jeremy hypothesis) is the best explanation available to Sally for all of the evidence she currently has obtained through the first four steps. There are multiple witnesses locating someone who fits Jeremy's description at the scene of the crime at the time at which it was committed. Some drug paraphernalia like that which Jeremy commonly uses to feed his drug habit was found at the scene of the crime. Jeremy seems to display a sense of satisfaction or gladness about the robbery. His bank account reflects a deposit shortly after the incident. Other current suspects, while not ruled out, do not fit the evidence Sally currently has anywhere nearly as well as Jeremy does. The Jeremy hypothesis is the best available explanation for the evidence Sally currently has and it is a very good explanation of that evidence.

But Sally isn't justified in believing the Jeremy hypothesis. For, she has good reason to think that there may very well be relevant evidence concerning the burglary that she does not currently have. After all, there have been many times in the past where, after completing step four of her investigation, things took a dramatic swing. It has not at all been uncommon that at these later stages in the process, an alternative suspect emerges who fits the data even better than previous suspects. Thus, while the Jeremy hypothesis is the best available explanation of the evidence Sally currently has, and while it is even a very good explanation of that evidence, Sally is not justified in believing this hypothesis. Believing the Jeremy hypothesis would be premature. The correct explanation for Sally's data may very well not be available at present, and she has good reason to think this.<sup>5</sup>

In his recent article, McCain responds to this objection by arguing that in this case the Jeremy hypothesis (<Jeremy committed the burglary>) is not the best explanation available to Sally for why she has the total evidence she has. The reason is that the Jeremy hypothesis is too specific; a more general hypothesis will be better. He writes, "the mistake [Byerly and Martin] are making here is to assume that the hypothesis that one is justified in believing must be a specific one rather than a general one."<sup>6</sup> While he never proffers a general proposition that he takes to be a better explanation of Sally's evidence than the Jeremy hypothesis, it seems that he has in mind something like <Somebody committed the burglary>.

In support of this contention, McCain compares our example to a case in which you leave your home for an hour and distinctly remember locking your door prior to leaving. Upon returning, you find your door has been forced open and some of your belongings are missing. He says of this case, "the best explanation of your evidence is that someone or other robbed you. This is the best

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<sup>5</sup> Byerly and Martin, "Problems for Explanationism," 783.

<sup>6</sup> McCain, "Explanationism: Defended," 347.

explanation even though you don't have a particular suspect in mind."<sup>7</sup> He continues:

To make this point even clearer add to the case that you notice your neighbor's five-year-old son has been playing in your yard, and still is. One hypothesis that is available to you is that your neighbor's five-year-old son robbed you. However, given your background evidence concerning what would be required to break open your door...the hypothesis that someone other than the five-year-old stole your belongings is a better explanation than the hypothesis that your neighbor's five-year-old robbed you.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, he contends, a more general hypothesis will be superior to the Jeremy hypothesis in our example. And so explanationist views needn't have the problematic implication in our example that Sally is justified in believing the Jeremy hypothesis.

The problem with McCain's response is easy to spot. Indeed, in our previous work, we addressed this kind of objection explicitly, showing why the Jeremy hypothesis in fact is superior to more general hypotheses of the kind McCain seems to have in mind. McCain has simply overlooked what we said.

The central reason that the Jeremy hypothesis is superior to a more general hypothesis like <Somebody committed the burglary> is that the latter hypothesis does not predict all of the relevant data in the example, while the Jeremy hypothesis does. In particular, the more general hypothesis does not predict Jeremy's attitude, the facts about his bank account, the reports of eyewitnesses of someone fitting Jeremy's description, or the presence of drug paraphernalia of the same kind known to be employed by Jeremy. Obviously, this is one important way in which our example differs dramatically from the case discussed by McCain. There is not comparable data that is well-explained in his example by the hypothesis that the five-year-old is the culprit.

Now, as we observed in our original article, general hypotheses of the kind McCain seems to have in mind can be modified so as to address this problem. Rather than <Somebody committed the burglary> one might propose a hypothesis along the following lines: <Somebody who looked like Jeremy committed the burglary *and* Jeremy didn't like the victims and he received the deposit in some other way>. We argued, however, that while such hypotheses manage to predict the relevant data, they still are not as good as the Jeremy hypothesis. This is because the Jeremy hypothesis offers something that these rival explanations do not: it provides a *simple* and *unified* explanation of the relevant data. Since such

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<sup>7</sup> McCain, "Explanationism: Defended," 348.

<sup>8</sup> McCain, "Explanationism: Defended," 348.

simplicity and unification are important explanatory virtues, the Jeremy hypothesis is better than these rivals.

McCain has said nothing to address these important contentions from our original article, and because of this his challenge to the problem we raise for the sufficiency of explanationist views fails. Explanationist views, whether Super-Explanationist or not, remain threatened by this important problem concerning their sufficiency.

## 2. Challenging the Necessity of Explanationism

In addition to challenging the sufficiency of explanationist views, our “Problems for Explanationism on Both Sides” also defended a challenge to the necessity of explanationist views first introduced by Byerly.<sup>9</sup> The challenge Byerly presented aimed to identify a case in which a person is justified in believing a proposition *p*, but *p* is *not* part of the best available explanation for the person’s evidence. Byerly’s challenge focused on contingent propositions concerning future events. He offered the following example:

Suppose I’m on the golf course on a sunny, calm day. My putting stroke has been working for me most of the day, and I’m now on the sixteenth green. It’s not a long putt—just six feet. I’m fairly confident. I rotate my shoulders, pulling the putter back, and then accelerate through the ball. It rolls toward the cup. The speed looks good. The line looks on. Yes, I believe it’s going in!<sup>10</sup>

In such cases, there is a belief about the future (<the ball is going to go in the cup>) that intuitively should be judged justified, and yet its truth is not part of the best explanation for why the subject has the evidence he currently has. The explanation for why the subject has the evidence he currently does consists in a body of present and past facts, not future facts.

McCain originally responded to this example by arguing that it could be adequately handled by a version of explanationism that allows available logical entailments of the best available explanation of one’s evidence to be justified. This version of explanationism, also defended in McCain’s book, says:

(Ex-EJ) A person, *S*, with evidence *e* at *t* is justified in believing *p* at *t* iff at *tS* has considered *p* and either (i) *p* is part of the best explanation available to *S* at *t* for why *S* has *e*, or (ii) *p* is available to *S* as a logical consequence of the best explanation available to *S* at *t* for why *S* has *e*.<sup>11,12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Byerly, “Explanationism and Justified Beliefs.”

<sup>10</sup> Byerly, “Explanationism and Justified Beliefs,” 235.

<sup>11</sup> McCain, “Evidentialism, Explanationism,” 80.

McCain argued that even though <the ball is going to go in the cup> is not part of the best explanation for the golfer's evidence, it is nonetheless a logical entailment of the best explanation for the golfer's evidence. Moreover, appealing to logical consequences in the way that Ex-EJ does, McCain argued, is also motivated by other alleged counterexamples to explanationism already known in the literature. One such example is Lehrer's example involving the Pythagorean Theorem. Lehrer describes it this way:

Imagine that I am standing with my toe next to a mouse that is three feet from a four-foot-high flagpole with an owl sitting on top. From this information concerning boundary conditions and the Pythagorean Theorem, which we here construe as an empirical law, we can deduce the mouse is five feet from the owl.<sup>13</sup>

McCain proposed that the logical consequence relations employed in his Ex-EJ could adequately account for not only cases like Byerly's golf case, but also cases like Lehrer's Pythagorean Theorem case. The claim <the mouse is five feet from the owl> is a logical consequence of the best available explanation for Lehrer's evidence, just as <the ball is going to go in the cup> is a logical consequence of the best available explanation for Byerly's evidence.

In our article, we disputed this contention of McCain's, arguing that appealing to logical consequence relations in the way Ex-EJ does cannot account for the golfer being justified in believing that the ball will go in. In his response to us in this journal, McCain appears prepared to concede that we are correct. Our argument, he says, "provides grounds for thinking that Ex-EJ is in need of revision." Thus, McCain has offered an interesting proposal for the kind of revision needed. His proposal, which has important historical antecedents,<sup>14</sup> appeals to explanatory relations rather than logical relations. Because the resulting view appeals more thoroughly to explanatory relations (something McCain touts in its favor), we call the resulting view "Super-Explanationism." It says the following:

(Super-Explanationism) A person, S, with evidence *e* at *t* is justified in believing *p* at *t* iff at *t* S has considered *p* and: either (i) *p* is part of the best explanation available to S at *t* for why S has *e*, or (ii) *p* is available to S as an explanatory consequence of the best explanation available to S at *t* for why S has *e*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> McCain, "Explanationism: Defended," 334.

<sup>13</sup> Keith Lehrer, *Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 166.

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert Harman, *Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

<sup>15</sup> McCain, "Explanationism: Defended," 339.

In the following section, we will explain why McCain thinks Super-Explanationism can handle both the objection from justified beliefs about the future (the golf case) and the objection from justified beliefs about mathematical entailment (Lehrer's Pythagorean Theorem case). We argue, however, that Super-Explanationism cannot in fact handle the objection from justified beliefs about mathematical entailment.

### 3. Super-Explanationism

McCain sees the justified belief in the golf case (<the ball is going to go in the cup>) as an inductive belief.<sup>16</sup> He thinks that Super-Explanationism returns the verdict that such a belief is justified for just the same reason it returns the verdict that any belief justified on the basis of inductive evidence is justified. When a subject *S* has observed a good many *F*s, and most of them have been *G*, then <most *F*s are *G*> is a part of the best available explanation of *S*'s evidence. When the percentage of observed *F*'s that have been *G* is high enough, and when there have been a sufficient number of observed *F*s, it is plausible to think that *S* is justified in believing that the next observed *F* will be a *G*. McCain thinks Super-Explanationism yields this result via clause (ii), because <the next observed *F* will be a *G*> is an explanatory consequence of the best explanation available to *S* as to why she has her evidence. The proposition <most *F*s are *G*> is included in the best explanation for her evidence, and <most *F*s are *G*> better explains <the next observed *F* will be a *G*> than it explains its denial.<sup>17</sup> Applied to the golf case, McCain's proposal is that the best explanation available to the golfer for his current evidence is that most balls in circumstances relevantly like those the present ball is in go into the cup, and that it is an explanatory consequence of this claim that the present ball is going to go in the cup. Thus, clause (ii) of Super-Explanationism implies that the golfer is justified in believing the ball will go in.

It is important for McCain that Super-Explanationism handles not only justified beliefs about the future, but also beliefs justified from mathematical entailment. He argues that Super-Explanationism does yield the correct verdict in cases like the one discussed by Lehrer, though in a way that differs from the way he had previously attempted to account for this case. Recall that Lehrer argues that he is justified in believing <the mouse of five feet from the owl> even though

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<sup>16</sup> McCain, "Explanationism: Defended," 340.

<sup>17</sup> Importantly, McCain writes, "...by saying that *p* is an 'explanatory consequence of the best explanation available to *S* at *t*' I mean that *p* would better be explained by the best explanation of *S*'s evidence available to *S* at *t* than  $\sim p$  would (McCain, "Explanationism: Defended," 339)."

“he has no explanation of why the mouse is five feet from the owl.”<sup>18</sup> McCain, while admitting that “initially one might be inclined to agree with Lehrer,”<sup>19</sup> argues that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> *is* part of the best explanation available to Lehrer for why he has the evidence he does. This is because part of Lehrer’s evidence, McCain thinks, is a seeming state in which it seems to Lehrer that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> follows from <the mouse is three feet from base of the flagpole> and <the base of the flagpole is four feet from the owl>.<sup>20</sup> “Plausibly,” McCain writes, “part of the best explanation available to Lehrer for why it seems that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> follows from his evidence is that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> is in fact true.”<sup>21</sup> Because the proposition <the mouse is five feet from the owl> provides the best available explanation for this why it seems to Lehrer that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> follows from these other propositions, clause (i) in Super-Explanationism yields the result that Lehrer is justified in believing this proposition.

We think it is implausible, however, that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> is part of the best explanation for why it seems to Lehrer that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> follows from <the mouse is three feet from base of the flagpole> and <the base of the flagpole is four feet from the owl>. A much more plausible explanation for why it seems to Lehrer that the one proposition follows from the other propositions is because Lehrer has internalized the Pythagorean Theorem, so-to-speak. Thinking in accordance with the relevant mathematical entailment has become second nature to him. The superiority of this explanation to the one offered by McCain can be seen by observing the following important fact: even if Lehrer believed there were no mice or owls in the world, it would still seem to him that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> *follows from* <the mouse is three feet from base of the flagpole> and <the base of the flagpole is four feet from the owl>. Neither the existence of the mouse, let alone its distance from the owl, explains why it seems to Lehrer that the one proposition follows from the others. This is because his seeming is just about what follows from what, not about

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<sup>18</sup> Lehrer, *Knowledge*, 178.

<sup>19</sup> McCain, “Explanationism: Defended,” 342.

<sup>20</sup> McCain never says explicitly from which propositions he thinks it seems to Lehrer that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> follows. Here we provide what we think is a charitable interpretation. The reader should note that, strictly speaking, it is problematic for McCain to claim that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> follows from Lehrer’s *evidence* as he does in the cited sentence. This is because McCain advocates a psychological conception of evidence according to which evidence consists in certain mental states. Nothing, of course, follows from mental states.

<sup>21</sup> McCain, “Explanationism: Defended,” 343.



what there is in the world. Thus, McCain's attempt to account for Lehrer's Pythagorean Theorem case by appealing to clause (i) of Super-Explanationism does not succeed.

McCain might attempt to salvage Super-Explanationism by appealing not to (i), but to (ii). This would, after all, follow his earlier pattern for explaining the case where he had appealed to clause (ii) rather than clause (i) of Ex-EJ. Taking this route would involve McCain in arguing that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> is explained better by the best explanation for Lehrer's evidence than is its denial. In particular, McCain might suggest that included in the best explanation for Lehrer's evidence are the propositions <the mouse is three feet from base of the flagpole>, <the base of the flagpole is four feet from the owl>, and <the Pythagorean Theorem is true>. Since these propositions explain <the mouse is five feet from the owl> better than they would explain its denial, Lehrer is justified in believing this claim.

Unfortunately for McCain, this approach also faces intractable difficulties. In particular, its consistent application will require McCain to affirm the problematic claim that some propositions partially explain themselves. To see why this is the case notice first that its application to the case as Lehrer originally described it yields the conclusion that <the mouse is three feet from the base of the flag pole> partially explains <the mouse is five feet from the owl>. Now, suppose that we tweak Lehrer's original example in the following way. Instead of having <the mouse is three feet from base of the flagpole>, <the base of the flagpole is four feet from the owl>, and <the Pythagorean Theorem is true> as parts of the best explanation for his evidence, Lehrer has <the mouse is five feet from the owl>, <the base of the flagpole is four feet from the owl>, and <the Pythagorean Theorem is true> as parts of the best explanation for his evidence. Here McCain will want to maintain that Lehrer is justified in believing <the mouse is three feet from base of the flagpole>. Yet, if he does so consistently, by appealing to clause (ii) of Super-Explanationism in the way proposed in the previous paragraph, this will require claiming that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> partially explains <the mouse is three feet from base of the flagpole>. And this, by the transitivity of partial explanation, yields the problematic result that <the mouse is five feet from the owl> partially explains itself.

One way to summarize the problem with this second approach is to say that on this approach McCain would be trying to get explanatory relations to do the work of entailment relations. But, entailment relations can be symmetric while explanatory relations cannot. There's no problem with propositions  $p$ ,  $q$ , and  $r$  entailing proposition  $s$ , while propositions  $s$ ,  $r$ , and  $q$  entail proposition  $p$ . Indeed,

propositions entail themselves, and this is unproblematic. Yet, it *is* problematic for propositions to explain themselves. And for this reason it is also problematic to maintain what the consistent application of this second approach demands in cases like Lehrer's Pythagorean Theorem case.

It appears then that there is not an attractive way for McCain to maintain that his Super-Explanationism can account for mathematical entailment cases such as Lehrer's. His own proposal about how to accommodate these cases requires an implausible view about how seemings regarding what follows from what are best explained, and an alternative approach we have here canvassed yields the unattractive result that propositions can partially explain themselves. Thus, even if Super-Explanationism can handle adequately the kinds of cases we had originally urged against other versions of explanationism such as Ex-EJ, it faces a distinct challenge to its necessity. It cannot handle adequately cases of mathematical entailment that Ex-EJ could.

#### 4. Ecclectic Explanationism

The last observation of the previous section reveals a potential way forward for explanationists. Suppose (ii) in Super-Explanationism handles cases like Byerly's golf case and (ii) in Ex-EJ handles cases like Lehrer's Pythagorean Theorem case. Perhaps the best approach for the explanationist is to combine (ii) in Ex-EJ and (ii) Super-Explanationism to form a third modified explanationist view we'll call Ecclectic Explanationism:

(Ecclectic Explanationism) A person, S, with evidence *e* at *t* is justified in believing *p* at *t* iff at *t* S has considered *p* and: either (i) *p* is part of the best explanation available to S at *t* for why S has *e*, or (ii) *p* is available to S as an explanatory consequence of the best explanation available to S at *t* for why S has *e*, or (iii) *p* is available to S as a logical consequence of the best explanation available to S at *t* for why S has *e*.

The Ecclectic Explanationist could rely on (ii) to handle Byerly's golf case and (iii) to handle Lehrer's Pythagorean Theorem case. At least the challenges we've raised concerning the necessity of explanationism can be met, even if the challenge we've raised to its sufficiency cannot.

Not so fast, we say. For, once one notices that probabilistic relations, like entailment relations and unlike explanatory relations, can be symmetric, one should begin to worry that an objection sharing much of the form of Lehrer's objection can be revived. The revived objection simply needs to substitute probabilistic relations where Lehrer's example employs mathematical entailment relations.

Cases involving surprising correlations illustrate the possibility of this kind of objection well. For example, consider the following surprising fact: most years between 1999 and 2009 where Nicholas Cage appeared in at least 2 films were years between 1999 and 2009 where there were at least 98 drownings, *and* most years between 1999 and 2009 where there were at least 98 drownings were years between 1999 and 2009 where Cage appeared in at least 2 films.<sup>22</sup> Now, imagine that someone, Joe, comes to know this fact, but does so without coming to know the number of Cage films and drownings for any particular year. Suppose next that Joe learns that in some particular year in the interval, say 2006, Cage was in at least 2 movies. Depending upon exactly the strength of the correlation and the appropriate threshold for justification, it is plausible that Joe would be justified in believing that in 2006 there were at least 98 drownings.<sup>23</sup>

Cases like this one pose a significant challenge to the necessity of all explanationist views examined in this paper, including Ecclectic Explanationism. The explanationist cannot appeal to clause (i) of Ecclectic Explanationism to defend the justification of Joe's belief for reasons paralleling those offered in the previous section against McCain's use of clause (i) in response to Lehrer's case. It might seem to Joe that the claim that there were at least 2 Cage films in 2006 and the claim that Cage films and drownings are appropriately correlated makes it likely that there were at least 98 drownings in 2006. But, this seeming isn't explained by there being 98 drownings in 2006. Indeed, the seeming would persist even if there were no Cage films or drownings. It is just a seeming about what makes what probable, not about what there is in the world.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.tylervigen.com/spurious-correlations>.

<sup>23</sup> If the reader demands a higher threshold for justification, a structurally parallel case can be found where the correlation is stronger.

<sup>24</sup> It is perhaps worth observing here that a potentially distinct approach to responding to Lehrer's original example which one might think would lend some support to the present strategy is unlikely to yield such support. The approach we have in mind is that suggested in Ted Poston, *Reason and Explanation: A Defense of Explanatory Coherentism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Poston appears to think that in Lehrer's example, <the mouse is five feet from the owl> is *part* of the best explanation for Lehrer's evidence, and not simply entailed by that explanation. He writes that if Lehrer's example is to provide a counterexample to explanationism, "it must be false that [Lehrer's] justification consists in the fact that the proposition that 'the mouse is five feet from the owl' is part of a virtuous explanatory system which beats its competitors. Yet this claim is dubious. [Lehrer's] belief follows from the boundary conditions and the Pythagorean theorem which are parts of a virtuous explanatory system which beats competitors." (Poston, *Reason and Explanation*, 96-7) More generally, it seems that on Poston's view *p*'s being entailed by the best explanatory system implies that *p* is part of that system. Yet, we would propose that this strategy, even if successful in responding to

Nor can clause (ii) of Ecclectic Explanationism come to the rescue in such cases in the way it can for cases like Lehrer's. For, the correlation between Cage films and drownings, while strong, is imperfect. It does not follow as a *logical consequence* from the fact that in most years between 1999 and 2009 Cage films and drownings are appropriately correlated and in 2006 there were at least two Cage films that in 2006 there were at least 98 drownings.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, and most importantly in the present context, clause (iii) of Ecclectic Explanationism is also impotent, for the same reason it is impotent to explain Lehrer's justification in his example. In order to employ clause (iii) consistently to account for cases like the present one, the Ecclectic Explanationist must affirm that some propositions partially explain themselves. For example, in the present case, if the explanationist is to employ clause (iii) she will have to maintain that Cage's appearing in at least 2 movies in 2006 partially explains there being at least 98 drownings in 2006. But, if we altered the case so that Joe had come to learn that there were at least 98 drownings in 2006 rather than that there were at least 2 Cage films, a consistent application of this strategy would yield the result that there being at least 98 drownings in 2006 partially explains there being at least 2 Cage films in 2006. By transitivity of partial explanation, it follows that there being at least 2 Cage films in 2006 partially explains itself. And that's no good for anyone.

## 5. Conclusion

The proximate aim of this paper has been to respond to Kevin McCain's recent arguments aiming to show that objections we had raised to the necessity and sufficiency of explanationist views can be overcome. We showed that McCain's response to our objection to the sufficiency of explanationist views overlooks important components of our previous work, and as a result is unsuccessful. We

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cases like Lehrer's mathematical entailment case, should not be expanded in the way necessary to handle the present case. For, even if one grants the claim that  $p$  being entailed by the best explanatory system makes  $p$  a part of the best explanatory system, one should not hold that  $p$ 's being made probable by the best explanatory system entails that  $p$  is part of that system. This would conflict with the explanatory virtues of simplicity and conservatism Poston emphasizes. Therefore, the view suggested in Poston's work does not appear to offer the explanationist an attractive alternative for handling the present example.

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, insofar as explanationist views cannot appeal to clause (ii) of Ecclectic Explanationism to account for Byerly's golf case [something McCain seems willing to grant], they cannot do so here either. For, the cases are parallel in that those parts of the subject's best explanation which seem to justify the relevant belief in each case are not sufficient to logically guarantee the truth of this belief, but are only sufficient to make it very likely.

then showed that novel versions of explanationism to which the explanationist might appeal in order to respond to our objection to the necessity of explanationism face distinct objections to their necessity. Indeed, we identified a novel kind of case which poses a significant challenge to the necessity of all version of explanationism. As a result, explanationist theories – however developed – face persistent problems on both sides.



# SUPPOSITIONAL REASONING AND PERCEPTUAL JUSTIFICATION

Stewart COHEN

ABSTRACT: James Van Cleve raises some objections to my attempt to solve the bootstrapping problem for what I call “basic justification theories.” I argue that given 1 the inference rules endorsed by basic justification theorists, we are *a priori* (propositionally) justified in believing that perception is reliable. This blocks the bootstrapping result.

KEYWORDS: bootstrapping, basic justification theories, *a priori*, perception

James Van Cleve raises some objections to my attempt to solve the bootstrapping problem for what I call “basic justification theories.”<sup>1</sup> I argue that given 1 the inference rules endorsed by basic justification theorists, we are *a priori* (propositionally) justified in believing that perception is reliable. This blocks the bootstrapping result.<sup>2</sup> I appeal to two defensible claims about perceptual justification:

- (1) Perceptual justification proceeds in terms of propositional, i.e., propositionally representable, reasons concerning how things appear.
- (2) A proposition *P* can be one’s reason, even if one does not believe *P*.

Given (1), we can say that, e.g., *the table looks red* is a (defeasible) reason for me to believe the table is red. Given (2), I can possess that reason even if I do not believe the table looks red. Rather I can possess that reason if I am in a certain phenomenal state, the state of the table’s looking red to me. On this view, there is a defeasible inference rule

*R: a looks red*  
*a is red*

One may think that inference is a relation that obtains only between beliefs. As we do not typically have beliefs about how things appear, it may be misleading to characterize *R* as an inference rule. If so, we can think of *R* as a rule

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<sup>1</sup> James Van Cleve, “Does Suppositional Reasoning Solve the Bootstrapping Problem?” *Logos & Episteme* VI, 3 (2015): 351-363. All Van Cleve page references are to this.

<sup>2</sup> See Stewart Cohen, “Bootstrapping, Defeasible Reasoning, and *A Priori* Justification,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 24, 1 (2010):141-159.

Stewart Cohen

that permits transitions from perceptual states to beliefs about the world, e.g., from something's looking red, to believing it is red. So according to R, when the table looks red to me, I can on that basis justifiably believe the table is red. Given the correctness of rule R, I argue we can engage in a kind of reasoning akin to conditional proof in logic. We can suppose

*a looks red*

Applying R, we can derive

*a is red*

Then by discharging the assumption, we can conclude

*If a is red, then a looks red.*

Since R is defeasible, this reasoning does not count as a proof of the conditional. instead it generates a defeasible reason for believing the conditional.

### **Perceptual Reasons and Experience**

Van Cleve's objection to my argument hinges on what he says are "two routes to becoming justified in believing something."

To explain why I think Cohen's strategy does not work, I begin by distinguishing two routes to being justified in believing something. One route – the only one recognized by Cohen – proceeds in terms of reasons; the other proceeds in terms of experiences. In the reasons route, one 'has' a reason, which supports some further proposition... A typical case would involve believing some premises and inferring a conclusion from them; the premises would be one's reasons (or their conjunction one's reason). Cohen is willing to speak also of reasons in cases in which one does not believe the premises or draw any explicit inference. (354-355)

On the view of perceptual justification I outlined, what Van Cleve characterizes as two different ways of becoming justified are actually the same. On my view, *a looks red* is a defeasible reason to believe *a is red*. I possess this reason just in case I have a certain kind of experience, viz. an experience whereby *a* does look red to me. So there is no dichotomy between the experiential route to justification and the reasons route. One has a perceptual reason in virtue of having a perceptual experience.<sup>3</sup>

Does Van Cleve have an objection to my account of perceptual justification? Here is Van Cleve:

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<sup>3</sup> I argue for this in Cohen, "Bootstrapping, Defeasible Reasoning," 150-151.



I think this much is clear, however: having a reason *P* that supports *Q* does not make you justified in believing *Q* (or make *Q* propositionally justified for you) unless *P* is justified for you. (355)

I do not understand this passage. You can possess *P* as a reason by being justified in believing *P*. But Van Cleve seems to be raising the possibility that you could possess *P* even though *P* is not justified for you. On my view, this is indeed possible, for there are two ways you can possess a reason *P*. You can possess *P* by justifiably believing *P*, or where *P* is the proposition that you are in a certain experiential state, you can possess *P* by being in that state. In the latter case, it would be possible to have *P* as a reason without *P* being justified for you. But Van Cleve *contrasts* having a reason with being in an experiential state. So I do not see how it is possible on Van Cleve's view to have *P* as a reason without *P* being justified for you. The important issue however concerns what it take to possess a reason. For if one possesses the reason *P*, then one is thereby (defeasibly) justified in believing *Q*. Perhaps Van Cleve just means to say that the only way to possess a reason is to be justified in believing it. But that is simply a denial of my view, not an argument against it.

Van Cleve also objects to the possibility of doing suppositional reasoning on an experiential view or perceptual justification:

But how would suppositional reasoning work in the framework of an experiential theory, in which what justifies me in believing that something is red is the experiential state of something's looking red to me?... First, I would make the supposition that *x* looks red to me; let's say I write it down. Next, I would conclude that *x* is red and write that down, too. But what authorizes me in doing that? What it takes to make me justified in believing that something is red is being in the state of having it look red to me, and I am not in that state. (356)

I agree that suppositional reasoning does not make sense if we do not view perceptual justification as deriving from perceptual reasons. We can do the suppositional reasoning only if *a looks red* is a reason to believe *a is red*. But just as in conditional proof, we do not have to prove *P* in order to suppose *P* in conditional proof, so we do not have to be justified in believing *P* in order to suppose *P* in suppositional reasoning. The whole point is to *assume* *P*, and then infer *Q* by the relevant rules. This allows us either to either prove (via conditional proof), or acquire a defeasible reason (via suppositional reasoning) for  $P \rightarrow Q$ .

Of course one may object to using conditional proof as a model for suppositional reasoning.<sup>4</sup> I argue that one may follow essentially the same procedure in doing suppositional proof that one follows when doing conditional

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<sup>4</sup> Brian Weatherson, "Induction and Supposition," *The Reasoner* 6 (2012): 78-80.

proof. But Van Cleve's objection is not that one cannot do suppositional reasoning with perceptual reasons. Rather it is that there are no perceptual reasons to form the basis for suppositional reasoning. But I do not see that he has an argument for this.

### Incoherence

I argue that basic justification theories are incoherent in denying

- (1) We cannot have justified perceptual beliefs without having a prior justified belief that perception is reliable.

Basic justification theorists endorse rule *R* that allows one to believe *a is red* on the basis of *a looks red*. But if my argument is correct, anyone who is competent in the use of the rule is propositionally justified via suppositional reasoning in believing that perception is reliable. This means one cannot have justified perceptual beliefs without having a prior justified belief that perception is reliable.

Van Cleve suggests that I myself am guilty of incoherence. I endorse rule *R* while also accepting (1). *R* allows me to be justified in believe *a is red* on the basis of *a looks red*, while (1) says that one cannot have a justified perceptual belief without a prior justified belief that perception is reliable. Van Cleve questions how *a looks red* can be sufficient for me to be justified in believing *a is red*, if a necessary condition of my being so justified is that I have prior justification for believing that perception is reliable.

But there is no incoherence here. The table's looking red is sufficient for me to believe that it is red because rule *R* licenses my believing the table is red solely *on the basis of* its looking red. But that is consistent with (1) in that my being justified in this way *entails* that I have justification for believing that perception is reliable. For if I am justified via the rule, then I am competent in the use of *R*. And if I am competent to use *R*, then I am propositionally justified via suppositional reasoning in believing perception is reliable. That perception is reliable is not part of my justificatory basis for believing the table is red, rather it is a necessary consequence of it.

### Epistemic Supervenience

Van Cleve argues that my view violates a plausible epistemic supervenience principle:

- if two beliefs (occurring in the same or different worlds) are just alike in all nonepistemic respects – in their content, their environmental causes, the

experiences that accompany them, their relations to the other beliefs of the subject, and so on – then they are also alike in epistemic status; both are justified to the same degree. Equivalently, whenever a belief is justified or has a certain epistemic status, it also has some constellation of nonepistemic properties such that (necessarily) any belief with those properties is justified. For short, for any epistemic property any belief possesses, there is a nonepistemic sufficient condition for it. (361)

I agree that we should accept this principle, but disagree that my view violates it. On my view, there is a non-epistemic condition sufficient for perceptual justification. For example, having the reason *a looks red* is sufficient for justifiably believing *a is red*. Van Cleve worries that my view violates supervenience because I say that perceptual justification requires having justification for believing perception is reliable, an epistemic condition. But given that the epistemic condition is entailed by the non-epistemic condition, there is no violation of supervenience. There is no barrier to saying that if two beliefs are alike in all non-epistemic respects then they are also alike in epistemic status.



# REPLY TO ADAMS AND CLARKE

Tristan HAZE

ABSTRACT: Here I defend two counterexamples to Nozick's truth-tracking theory of knowledge from an attack on them by Adams and Clarke. With respect to the first counterexample, Adams and Clarke make the error of judging that my belief counts as knowledge. More demonstrably, with respect to the second counterexample they make the error of thinking that, on Nozick's method-relativized theory, the method *M* in question in any given case must be generally reliable.

KEYWORDS: knowledge, truth-tracking, counterexamples

In a recent paper<sup>1</sup> I put forward two counterexamples to Nozick's truth-tracking theory of knowledge. I claimed that these work against Nozick's simple truth-tracking account, the method-relativized version of his truth-tracking account, and a recent modification of the account due to Briggs and Nolan,<sup>2</sup> on which counterfactuals are replaced with dispositional claims. In a discussion note in this journal,<sup>3</sup> Adams and Clarke have argued that both of my counterexamples fail.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tristan Haze, "Two New Counterexamples to the Truth-Tracking Theory of Knowledge," *Logos & Episteme* VI, 3 (2015): 309-311.

<sup>2</sup> Rachael Briggs and Daniel Nolan, "Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know," *Analysis* 72, 2 (2012): 314-316.

<sup>3</sup> Fred Adams and Murray Clarke, "Two Non-Counterexamples to Truth-Tracking Theories of Knowledge," *Logos & Episteme* VII, 1 (2016): 67-73.

<sup>4</sup> An incidental clarification about scope: potentially misleadingly, Adams and Clarke claim that my counterexamples are aimed 'at tracking theories generally' (Adams and Clarke, "Two Non-Counterexamples," 67). In keeping with this, they consider, as an afterthought, my counterexamples with respect to an account due to Dretske. To be clear: in my title and my first sentence, I use the phrase 'the truth-tracking theory of knowledge' to designate my target. In my last sentence, I use the phrase 'this tired old theory' to designate the same. The idea here, adopted for expository convenience in the title and opening and closing sentences, was that there is a theory, Nozick's theory, which comes in two or perhaps three versions: Nozick's simple version, his method-relativized version, and perhaps the modified dispositional account of Briggs and Nolan. In the body of the paper, I am more specific: I claim, of each of these three versions, that my counterexamples work against them, and I make no other comparable claims about other versions or accounts. So I should not be read as claiming that my counterexamples work against any account other than these three.

I believe that Adams and Clarke have made two important errors. With respect to my first counterexample, they make the error of judging that my belief does indeed count as knowledge. With respect to my second counterexample (and this also appears in their discussion of my first counterexample) they make the error of holding that, on Nozick's method-relativized theory, the method *M* in question in any given case must be generally reliable. They have in effect adopted a different theory of knowledge, one which I make no claim to be able to refute, and proceeded as if this is Nozick's method-relativized theory.

### The First Error

Here is my first counterexample:

I have a deep-seated, counterfactually robust delusional belief that my neighbour is a divine oracle. He is actually a very reliable and truthful tax-lawyer. There is a point about tax law he has always wanted to tell me, *p*. One day, he tells me that *p*, and I believe him, because I believe he is a divine oracle. I would never believe him if I knew he was a lawyer, being very distrustful of lawyers.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding this, Adams and Clarke write:

Of course, if the delusion is only about whether or not the neighbor is a lawyer, and not about anything the neighbor says to Haze about tax law, then the delusion does not infect Haze's belief-forming methods about propositions uttered by the neighbor. In that case, given the reliable testimony of the neighbor and the reliability of Haze's hearing and understanding what the neighbor says and his belief forming method of trusting what the neighbor says about tax law, we fail to see why Haze would not know that *p*. His belief forming methods about what the neighbor says about tax law are delusion-free. So his beliefs about tax law track the truth and Nozick's theory yields the result that Haze knows that *p*. We see this as the right result and not a counterexample to Nozick.<sup>6</sup>

Firstly, the assumption that they make is right: in the example as I intended it, the main delusion I have is that my neighbour is not a lawyer but a divine oracle. I was not imagining myself to have delusions concerning the issue of what my neighbour has and has not said to me.

So, Adams and Clark seem to understand my example correctly here, but maintain that in it, I do know that *p*. I think this is the wrong verdict. After all, if my delusion were removed, I would lose my belief that *p*.

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<sup>5</sup> Haze, "Two New Counterexamples," 310.

<sup>6</sup> Adams and Clarke, "Two Non-Counterexamples," 68.

It occurs to me that perhaps this counterexample should have been more fully specified. If we imagine the origin of my belief to have been forgotten by me, so that it becomes mere history, then *perhaps* I could be said to know that *p*. But as I am imagining it, the stuff about my neighbour being a divine oracle is fresh in my mind and I think of it with wonder every time I think of *p*.

I do not know what more to say in support of my view here, so I will leave it at that and just hope that you agree with me about this.

### The Second Error

Here there is more to say. I think I can argue conclusively that this second error is an error. For easy reference, here is the core part of Nozick's method-relativized theory of knowledge – his account of knowing-via-a-method:<sup>7</sup>

S knows, via method (or way of believing) M, that *p* iff

1. *p* is true
2. S believes, via method or way of coming to believe M, that *p*
3. If *p* weren't true, and S were to use M to arrive at a belief whether (or not) *p*, then S wouldn't believe, via M, that *p*
4. If *p* were true, and S were to use M to arrive at a belief whether (or not) *p*, then S would believe, via M, that *p*.

And here is my second counterexample:

My neighbour is a tax lawyer. Here, unlike in the previous counterexample, I have no delusional belief. It is my neighbour who is the strange one: for years, he has intently nurtured an eccentric plan to get me to believe the truth about whether *p*, where *p* is a true proposition of tax law, along with five *false* propositions about tax law. His intention to do this is very counterfactually robust. He moves in next door and slowly wins my trust. One day, he begins to regale me with points of tax law. He asserts six propositions: *p* and five false ones. I believe them all.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This time I use the exact wording of Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 179. Adams and Clarke point out that, in my original article, I departed slightly from Nozick's formulation. The differences were as follows: I had 'knowing' in place of the occurrence of 'believing' before the 'iff', did not include 'or way of coming to believe' in condition (2), and did not include 'then' in condition (4). None of these differences were introduced for any philosophical reason, and none of them would have made my counterexamples seem more plausible than they are.

<sup>8</sup> Haze, "Two New Counterexamples," 310.

First of all, I want to clear up a potentially distracting mistake on the part of Adams and Clarke as to what caused me to think this is a counterexample. They write:

We think the reason Haze believes this is a counterexample is because he relativizes the method *M* to the neighbor and the neighbor's dispensing of information and not to Haze's own belief-forming methods. Haze seems to think the method here is that with respect to the true proposition *p*, the neighbor would not say "*p*" unless *p*. This causes Haze to think Nozick's tracking conditions are satisfied and that Nozick's theory implies that Haze knows that *p*. However, this is not the case. (...) Nozick is very clear that methods are the belief-forming methods of the cognizer. (...) Haze's method *M* in the example is to trust what the neighbor says.<sup>9</sup>

Adams and Clarke have made a wrong conjecture here. I agree that the method *M* in the example is to trust what the neighbour says – that is exactly how I thought of it when I came up with the counterexample. I do think the tracking conditions are satisfied, but not because I have some idea of what the method *M* is which differs from Adams and Clarke's idea of what the method *M* is.

Now, this leads us into Adams and Clarke's argument that this counterexample fails. Immediately after the above quoted passage, they continue:

And this method clearly does not track the truth because it is not restricted to "*p*" alone, but freely ranges over the other five falsehoods the neighbor utters and Haze believes. So this too, when properly understood, does not constitute a counterexample to Nozick's tracking theory.<sup>10</sup>

The first thing to note about this argument is that it does not refer explicitly to any of Nozick's four conditions for knowledge-via-a-method. Nowhere do Adams and Clarke specify, by engaging explicitly with Nozick's theory as formulated in four conditions, why this example, according to them, fails to count as knowledge on that theory.

The second thing to note is that Nozick's account nowhere requires that the method *M* in question in a given case track the truth, where tracking the truth is something like general reliability.<sup>11</sup> I agree that, in this example, the method in

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<sup>9</sup> Adams and Clarke, "Two Non-Counterexamples," 69.

<sup>10</sup> Adams and Clarke, "Two Non-Counterexamples," 69.

<sup>11</sup> The heuristic talk of 'tracking the truth', which does not appear at all in Nozick's official account, is correctly applied as follows: Nozick's account of when a subject *S* knows a proposition *p* via method *M* requires *S*'s belief that *p* to track the truth. Perhaps this is also OK: the account requires that the method *M*, when used by *S*, tracks the truth with respect to *p*. On the other hand, we cannot properly say: the account requires that the method *M* tracks the truth in general. That is a mischaracterization of Nozick's theory.



question – trusting what my neighbour says – is not generally reliable. But that doesn't stop Nozick's conditions from being fulfilled, for the conditions do not require general reliability of method.

Regarding conditions (1) and (2), there is no disagreement here between me and Adams and Clarke. In my example,  $p$  is true, and I believe it via the method of trusting what my neighbour says. Condition (3) is satisfied: if  $p$  weren't true, and I were to use the method of trusting what my neighbour says to arrive at a belief as to whether (or not)  $p$ , I would not believe, via the method of trusting what my neighbour says, that  $p$ . As I stipulated in describing the counterexample, my neighbour's desire to have me believe the truth about  $p$  is very counterfactually robust. For the same reason, (4) is satisfied as well.

It is as though Adams and Clarke are misreading conditions (3) and (4), such that they are taking occurrences of ' $p$ ' in them as occurrences of a separate variable from that which the occurrences of ' $p$ ' on the left hand side of the analysis, and in (1) and (2), are occurrences of. That is, it is as though they are reading conditions (3) and (4) as together saying that, for a subject  $S$  to know a proposition  $p$  via method  $M$ , method  $M$  must be such that, for all propositions  $q$ , the subject  $S$  whose knowledge of  $p$  is in question would, if they used  $M$  to arrive at a belief whether (or not)  $q$ , believe  $q$  via  $M$  iff  $q$  were true. In other words, that the method  $M$  be generally reliable (for the subject  $S$  in question).

This is plainly not what conditions (3) and (4) mean. The occurrences of ' $p$ ' in (3) and (4) and the occurrences elsewhere are occurrences of *the same variable*. Given a subject  $S$  and a proposition  $p$ , what conditions (3) and (4) require in order for  $S$  to know  $p$  may be summed up as follows: the method in question  $M$ , as used by  $S$ , must be reliable with respect to  $p$ .

Adams and Clarke are free to advance a theory according to which, for a subject  $S$  to know  $p$  via method  $M$ , method  $M$  must be generally reliable. But Nozick's theory simply does not require this. Neither does the modified version of it due to Briggs and Nolan. My second counterexample stands.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Thanks to Peter Baumann and Neil Sinhababu for helpful correspondence.



# REJOINDER TO HAZE

Fred ADAMS, Murray CLARKE

ABSTRACT: Tristan Haze claims we have made two mistakes in replying to his two attempted counter-examples to Tracking Theories of Knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Here we respond to his two recent claims that we have made mistakes in our reply. We deny both of his claims.

KEYWORDS: Tracking Theories of Knowledge, Robert Nozick, Fred Dretske, putative counter-examples

## A. The Oracle Case:

In his original paper, Haze claimed to have invented two counter-examples to tracking theories (though he mainly targeted Nozick). In our reply to Haze, we explained why the examples were neither counter-examples to Nozick nor Dretske. In the first example, person A (Haze) delusionally thinks person B (his neighbor) is an oracle, not a knowledgeable tax lawyer. A dislikes lawyers and would not believe B if A knew B were a lawyer. B tells A “*p*,” a truth about tax law. A believes *p* but also delusionally believes B is an oracle. Haze argues that A does not know that *p* because of the delusion.

We countered that as long as the delusion does not affect A's ability to understand or believe what B says, and as long as B wouldn't say “*p*” unless *p*, that nothing in tracking theories bars A's knowing that *p*. The delusion does not affect A's coming to know that *p*.<sup>2</sup> With respect to the current interpretation Haze says:

Firstly, the assumption that they make is right: in the example as I intended it, the main delusion I have is that my neighbor is not a lawyer but a divine oracle. I was not imagining myself to have delusions concerning the issue of what my neighbour has and has not said to me.... It occurs to me that perhaps this counterexample should have been more fully specified. If we imagine the origin of my belief to have been forgotten by me, so that it becomes mere history, then *perhaps* I could be said to know that *p*. But as I am imagining it, the stuff about my neighbor being a divine oracle is fresh in my mind and I think of it with wonder every time I think of *p*...I do not know what more to say in support of

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<sup>1</sup> Tristan Haze, “Reply to Adams and Clarke,” *Logos & Episteme* VII, 2 (2016): 221-225.

<sup>2</sup> We also considered a case where the delusion spreads and does affect A's belief and does block knowledge, but Haze does not reply to that interpretation.

Fred Adams, Murray Clarke

my view here, so I will leave it at that and just hope that you agree with me about this.<sup>3</sup>

Haze claims that A still does not know that  $p$ . We still maintain that he does. Does it matter that A forgot where he acquired his belief that  $p$  is true? It could. If someone who did not know that  $p$  told him, it would matter. But B knows that  $p$ . In the “fully specified” emendation Haze insists that A remembers it was B who said “ $p$ ” each time A believes that  $p$ . We still do not see why that matters, as long as the delusion is not affecting A's ability to think clearly about the meanings of tax law  $p$  and as long as B knows tax law and is not being deceptive in any way. As far as we can tell A is tracking the truth about  $p$  and knows that  $p$ . Haze seems to be throwing himself on the court of public opinion. Okay, good. We have presented these ideas at several venues over the past year and everyone so far has agreed with us.

### **B. The Nutt Case:**

Now let's consider Haze's claim that we make a second mistake in our reply to him. Let's call the neighbor in the example ‘Norman Nutt.’ Haze's second example is this:

My neighbor is a tax lawyer. Here, unlike in the previous counterexample, I have no delusional belief. It is my neighbor who is the strange one: for years, he has intently nurtured an eccentric plan to get me to believe the truth about whether  $p$ , where  $p$  is a true proposition of tax law, along with five *false* propositions about tax law. His intention to do this is very counterfactually robust. He moves in next door to me and slowly wins my trust. One day, he begins to regale me with points of tax law. He asserts six propositions:  $p$  and five false ones. I believe them all.<sup>4</sup>

Our reply to Haze's second claim is this:

We think the reason Haze believes this is a counterexample is because he relativizes the method  $M$  to the neighbor and the neighbor's dispensing of information and not to Haze's own belief-forming methods. Haze seems to think the method here is that with respect to the true proposition  $p$ , the neighbor would not say “ $p$ ” unless  $p$ . This causes Haze to think Nozick's tracking conditions are satisfied and that Nozick's theory implies that Haze knows that  $p$ . However, this is not the case. (...) Nozick is very clear that methods are the belief-forming methods of the cognizer. (...) Haze's method  $M$  in the example is to trust what the neighbor says.... And this method clearly does not track the truth because it is not restricted to “ $p$ ” alone, but freely ranges over the other five

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<sup>3</sup> Haze, “Reply to Adams and Clarke,” 223.

<sup>4</sup> Haze, “Two New Counterexamples,” 310.

falsehoods the neighbor utters and Haze believes. So this too, when properly understood, does not constitute a counterexample to Nozick's tracking theory.<sup>5</sup>

Haze's new reply to us is this:

I agree that the method *M* in the example is to trust what the neighbor says – that is exactly how I thought of it when I came up with the counterexample. I do think the tracking conditions are satisfied, but not because I have some idea of what the method *M* is which differs from Adams and Clarke's idea of what the method *M* is.... The first thing to note about this argument is that it does not refer explicitly to any of Nozick's four conditions for knowledge-via-a-method. Nowhere do Adams and Clarke specify, by engaging explicitly with Nozick's theory as formulated in four conditions, why this example, according to them, fails to count as knowledge on that theory....The second thing to note is that Nozick's account nowhere requires that the method *M* in question in a given case track the truth, where tracking the truth is something like general reliability. I agree that, in this example, the method in question – trusting what my neighbor says – is not generally reliable. But that doesn't stop Nozick's conditions from being fulfilled, for the conditions do not require general reliability of method.<sup>6</sup>

Again, we fail to see the problem. Haze agrees that the method is “trusting what the neighbor says.” The neighbor, ‘Norman Nutt,’ says five false things and one true. Hence, condition three states: “If *p* weren't true, and Haze were to use the method of trusting what his neighbor, Norman Nutt, says to arrive at a belief as to whether (or not) *p*, Haze would not believe, via the method of trusting what Nutt says, that *p*.” Nutt harbors some deep, irrational propensity to lie to Haze about matters of law. Accordingly, it is entirely possible that if *p* weren't true, it might be the case that Nutt tells Haze that *p* is true. Thus, it's plausible that the proposition in question is false, and that Nozick's account is therefore correct in implying that Haze fails to acquire knowledge that *p*. Haze, however, contends that the proposition in question is true:

...if *p* weren't true, and I were to use the method of trusting what my neighbor says to arrive at a belief as to where (or not) *p*, I would not believe, via the method of trusting what my neighbor says, that *p*. As I stipulated in describing the counterexample, my neighbor's desire to have me believe the truth about *p* is very counterfactually robust.<sup>7</sup>

This method does not track the truth. Obviously! The crux of the problem is that it seems intuitively likely that if *p* weren't true, it might not be the case that Nutt speaks the truth regarding *p*! We are not sure what more we need to say.

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<sup>5</sup> Adams and Clarke, “Two Non-Counterexamples,” 69.

<sup>6</sup> Haze, “Reply to Adams and Clarke,” 224-225.

<sup>7</sup> Haze, “Reply to Adams and Clarke,” 225.

Contrary to Haze's claim that we have unjustifiably imported reliability requirements into Nozick's account, the reliability of the method for arriving at a belief is an intrinsic feature of the account, for the truth of the relevant counterfactual conditional is grounded in nomic relationships rather than in mere probabilistic correlations or in single-case realizations. Since the reliability involved in the account is complete, nomically grounded reliability, it is unaffected by the generality problems that plague probabilistic accounts like Goldman's reliable process theory.

Haze says that we are going rogue, and not staying true to Nozick's conditions. But as every constitutional lawyer knows, the letter of the law does not cover every application to every case. Some interpretation is required. Nozick's theory does not anticipate Haze's attempted counterexamples. But it is not hard to figure out how to apply the theory to the example and it goes as we suggest. This is not a matter of giving a new theory, but of interpreting the existing one. We can't help but note that Haze's original paper offered putative counter-examples to "tracking theories," not just to Nozick. We explained why they were not counterexamples to Nozick or Dretske. Haze did not accuse us of giving a different account than Dretske's – and for good reason. We provide an interpretation of how tracking theories must respond to the examples he raises in order to stay consistent with the intended interpretation of the conditions of the theories.

It is perhaps true that the general method "believing what the neighbor says" need not be tracking the truth for every possible thing the neighbor might say. But according to tracking theories of knowledge (Nozick's and Dretske's), if one is to know something about tax law from a tax lawyer, it had better be the case that the tax lawyer would not say "*p*" about tax law unless *p*. Since this is not the case for Haze's neighbor in example two, tracking theories say that Haze does not know that *p*. And we are not changing anything about tracking theories. The counterfactual, "the neighbor wouldn't say '*p*' unless *p*," is not true. It is right there in Nozick's condition 3 as relativized to the method Haze agrees he intended.<sup>8</sup> To conclude, we think that Haze is mistaken about both the Oracle Case and the Nutt Case: the first case does constitute knowledge while the second does not.

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<sup>8</sup> Many thanks to John A. Barker for comments on this paper.

# SCHROEDER AND WHITING ON KNOWLEDGE AND DEFEAT

Javier GONZÁLEZ DE PRADO SALAS

ABSTRACT: Daniel Whiting has argued, in this journal, that Mark Schroeder's analysis of knowledge in terms of subjectively and objectively sufficient reasons for belief makes wrong predictions in fake barn cases. Schroeder has replied that this problem may be avoided if one adopts a suitable account of perceptual reasons. I argue that Schroeder's reply fails to deal with the general worry underlying Whiting's purported counterexample, because one can construct analogous potential counterexamples that do not involve perceptual reasons at all. Nevertheless, I claim that it is possible to overcome Whiting's objection, by showing that it rests on an inadequate characterization of how defeat works in the examples in question.

KEYWORDS: knowledge, reasons, defeaters, fake barn cases, Mark Schroeder, Daniel Whiting

Mark Schroeder has recently proposed analyzing knowledge as belief for objectively and subjectively sufficient reasons.<sup>1</sup> This proposal has been challenged by Daniel Whiting,<sup>2</sup> who argues that it makes wrong predictions in fake barn cases. Schroeder has acknowledged the force of Whiting's objection, but he claims that it can be avoided if one adopts a suitable view of perceptual reasons (a view that he takes to be plausible for independent reasons).<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I argue that Schroeder's reply fails to address Whiting's objection in its full extent. The reason for this is that it is easy to construct counterexamples that are analogous to the one given by Whiting but that do not involve perceptual beliefs. After presenting some counterexamples of this sort, I will suggest that a general reply to Whiting's objection, which does not rely on a specific account of perceptual reasons, is available to Schroeder.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Schroeder, "Knowledge is Belief for Sufficient (Objective and Subjective) Reason," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology: Volume 5*, ed. Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 226-252.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Whiting, "Knowledge is *Not* Belief for Sufficient (Objective and Subjective) Reason," *Logos & Episteme* 6 (2015): 237-243.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Schroeder, "In Defense of the Kantian Account of Knowledge: Reply to Whiting," *Logos & Episteme* 6 (2015): 371-382.

### Schroeder's Proposal and Whiting's Objection

According to both Schroeder and Whiting, objective reasons are facts that count in favor of some action or attitude.<sup>4</sup> Subjective reasons, meanwhile, are apparent objective reasons (that is, apparent facts). Some, but not all, subjective reasons are also objective. Moreover, the reasons *for which* a subject adopts an attitude are those apparent facts on the basis of which the subject adopts the attitude. These reasons are among the subject's subjective reasons and may (but need not) be also objective reasons in favor of that attitude.

Schroeder's proposed analysis of knowledge is as follows:

A subject knows that *p* if and only if the reasons for which she believes *p* are both subjectively and objectively sufficient.<sup>5</sup>

According to Schroeder, the reasons for which an agent believes *p* are *subjectively* sufficient only if they are at least as weighty as the subject's subjective reasons in favor of alternative attitudes – more specifically, in favor of believing *not p* or of withholding belief. In turn, the reasons for which a subject believes *p* are *objectively* sufficient only if they are at least as weighty as all existing objective reasons in favor of alternatives (including those objective reasons that are beyond the agent's epistemic ken).

Whiting argues that fake barn cases are counterexamples to Schroeder's analysis. In fake barn scenarios, a subject – call her Sophie – does not know that she is in fake-barn county, where fake barns are frequent (and where, therefore, her perceptual recognition of barns is unreliable). Out of luck, Sophie stops in a field with one the few real barns in the county. She looks at it and forms the belief that she is facing a barn. According to the orthodox interpretation of these cases (accepted by both Schroeder and Whiting), Sophie does not count as knowing that she is facing a barn (although her belief is rational).

One could think that Schroeder's proposal can capture this orthodox interpretation easily, because in fake-barn environments the reasons for which Sophie believes are objectively defeated. The idea is that Sophie's perceptual reasons for believing are undercut by the fact that she is in fake-barn county, where her perceptual recognition of barns is unreliable. This fact would reduce the objective weight of the reasons for which Sophie believes, which as a result would become objectively insufficient: they would be outweighed by the existing reasons for alternative attitudes – in particular, for withholding belief. Therefore,

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<sup>4</sup> Schroeder, "Knowledge is Belief," 236-238, Whiting, "Knowledge is *Not* Belief," 238-239.

<sup>5</sup> Schroeder, "Knowledge is Belief," 242.



Schroeder's proposal would correctly predict that Sophie does not know that she is facing a barn.

Whiting, however, claims that this account of defeat in fake barn cases is mistaken. He argues that the defeater that Sophie is in fake-barn county is itself defeated by the further fact that Sophie is in real-barn field (that is, in a field with only real barns). According to Whiting, the defeating power of the first fact (in relation to Sophie's reasons for belief) is undermined by this second fact. Consequently, Sophie's perceptual reasons for belief retain their weight and are objectively (and subjectively) sufficient. If this is so, Schroeder should grant that Sophie counts as knowing – contrary to the orthodox reading of the case.

### Schroeder's Reply

Schroeder acknowledges that Whiting's objection is successful against his original proposal, but only, he claims, because this proposal rested on an inadequate account of perceptual reasons – according to which Sophie's reason for believing that she is facing a barn is that *it looks like a barn*.<sup>6</sup> Schroeder argues that Whiting's objection can be avoided if a suitable account of perceptual reasons (motivated by independent considerations) is adopted. On this alternative view, the perceptual reason for which Sophie believes is that *she sees that it is a barn*. Schroeder argues that when Sophie is in fake-barn county, she does not actually see that that is a barn (due to the unfavorable environment). Therefore, Sophie's subjective reason is not a fact, which means that it is not an objective reason for believing. Sophie does not believe for objectively sufficient reasons because she does not believe for objective reasons at all.

Schroeder's account of perceptual reasons is attractive and I will grant that it manages to overcome the specific counterexample posed by Whiting. However, Schroeder's strategy fails to offer a satisfactory response to the underlying worry behind Whiting's objection. The problem is that Whiting's objection generalizes beyond fake barn cases involving perceptual beliefs. One can find alternative examples that are structurally analogous to the one discussed by Whiting and that yet do not involve perceptual beliefs, but rather beliefs acquired via testimony or inference. In these examples, it is not plausible to claim that the reasons for which the subject believes are not facts and therefore not objective reasons. Thus, Schroeder's reply is ineffectual against this sort of potential counterexample. Nonetheless, such counterexamples are as seemingly threatening to Schroeder's

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<sup>6</sup> Schroeder, "In Defense," 376-381.

proposal as Whiting's one. Schroeder's proposal, therefore, remains under pressure.

### Counterexamples without Perceptual Belief

Consider first an example involving testimony:

**April Fool's day:** Sophie picks up randomly one among several local newspapers (generally very reliable). She reads that last evening's match was won by the local team, and accordingly she believes that this was the case. However, it is April Fool's day, a day in which most newspapers in town publish false stories. Sophie is not aware of this. She is not aware, either, of the lucky fact that the newspaper she happened to read is one of the few that does not follow the April Fool's tradition: it is as reliable as any other day.

This example seems analogous to the fake barn case. Sophie is basing her belief on a type of evidence that is reliable in most cases, but she does not know that she happens to be in a peculiar environment where this sort of evidence is generally unreliable. She is also unaware of the fact that, out of luck, she occupies one of the few positions in such an environment where forming a belief based on that type of evidence will lead her to believe something true. In the same way that intuitively Sophie lacks knowledge in fake barn cases, it seems that she lacks knowledge here.

Now, if one thinks that in fake barn cases the fact that Sophie is in real-barn field defeats the potentially defeating fact that she is in fake-barn county, then it seems that one should also think that the fact that the newspaper picked by Sophie does not adhere to the April Fool's tradition defeats the fact that it is April Fool's day. If this is so, the reasons for which Sophie believes would be undefeated.

Note also that in this example it seems that Sophie is believing for objective reasons. It remains a fact that the newspaper said that the match was won by the local team, and this fact is the reason for which Sophie formed her belief. Thus, Schroeder's reply does not apply here.

Similar examples can be devised for inferential knowledge:

**Platypus:** Sophie learns that her friend Jean's pet has laid an egg. She infers that Jean's pet is not a mammal. However, Jean lives in a peculiar town where most people's pets are platypuses – something Sophie is unaware of. Sophie is also unaware of the fact that Jean lives in a particular neighborhood where platypuses are not allowed (Jean's pet is actually a chicken).

Those convinced by Whiting's analysis of defeat in fake barn cases should also think, by parity, that the defeating fact that pet platypuses are frequent in Jean's town is defeated by the further fact that pet platypuses are not allowed in

Jean's neighborhood. Yet, Sophie is clearly believing for reasons that are objective, namely, the fact that Jean's pet has laid an egg.

These examples, I take it, are as problematic for Schroeder's proposal as fake barn cases. Nevertheless, perception does not play any interesting role in them. There are no apparent perceptual reasons that turn out to be non-factual: in these examples, the reasons for which Sophie believes are still facts. Thus, Schroeder's reply does not manage to block the general worry uncovered by Whiting's counterexample.

### Avoiding Whiting's Objection

Is there room for maneuver within the framework of Schroeder's proposal, in light of the generality of Whiting's objection? I think so. One may reject Whiting's contention that, in fake-barn county cases and the other examples considered, the defeaters for Sophie's reasons are themselves defeated. A correct account of defeat, I will argue, vindicates the view that, after all, Sophie's reasons for believing are objectively defeated in these cases.

For ease of exposition, I will focus on the fake-barn county example, assuming the view that Sophie's reason for believing that she is facing a barn is that it looks like a barn (nothing hangs on this; everything I will say is easily translatable to the other examples).

What facts could be seen as defeating Sophie's reasons in fake barn cases? Whiting follows Schroeder in thinking that the best candidate is the fact that Sophie is in fake-barn county (where her perceptual capacities are generally unreliable).<sup>7</sup> This picture, I submit, is incomplete. What defeats the reasons for which Sophie believes is the fact that she is in fake-barn county *plus the fact that she does not know that she is in real-barn field* – that is, plus the fact that she is not aware of being in a specific sub-section of fake-barn county where her perceptual capacities are actually reliable. These defeating facts are objective reasons for Sophie to doubt the reliability of her perceptual capacities, and as such, they reduce the weight of the perceptual reasons for which she believes. Moreover, by undermining Sophie's evidence as to whether she is facing a real barn, these reasons for doubting constitute objective reasons for Sophie to withhold belief.

The crucial point is that these objective reasons for Sophie to doubt are *not defeated* by the further fact that she is in real-barn field. Even if she is actually in real-barn field, given that Sophie is unaware of this fact (and that she is fake-barn

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<sup>7</sup> Whiting, "Knowledge is *Not* Belief," 240; Schroeder, "Knowledge is Belief," 247.

county, a generally unfavorable environment), there are still good objective reasons for Sophie to doubt whether she is facing a real barn. Of course, Sophie does not possess these reasons for doubting (they are not among her subjective reasons), as she is unaware of being in fake-barn county, a generally unfavorable environment. But these objective reasons for doubting exist, and this is all that is needed for them to defeat the objective reasons for which Sophie believes. Certainly, these reasons for doubting would disappear if Sophie learnt that she is in real-barn field; but we are assuming that she does not know that this is the case (the fact that she does not know it is part of the objective reasons for Sophie to doubt and withhold belief).

Imagine an alternative situation in which Sophie withholds belief because she knows that she is in fake-barn county and she is unaware of being in real-barn field. It seems clear that her reasons for withholding belief are subjectively undefeated – it is rational for her to withhold belief. I think that the reasons for which she withholds are also objectively sufficient: they are not defeated by her (unknowingly) being in real-barn field. If you remain unconvinced, consider the following piece of reasoning:

Sophie is looking at an apparent barn	
Sophie knows that she is in fake-barn county	
Sophie ignores whether she is in real-barn field	
Sophie actually is in real-barn field (she is facing a real barn)	
<hr/>	
Sophie may permissibly withhold belief	

This is good reasoning, which means that the objective reasons for which Sophie withholds belief are not defeated by the fourth premise – by the fact that Sophie is in real-barn field. Accordingly, it seems that in the original case where Sophie ignores that she is in fake-barn county, there are actually sufficient objective (though not subjective) reasons for her to withhold belief. Thus, in the original case the reasons for which Sophie believes are not objectively sufficient and, on Schroeder's view, she would not count as knowing.

It is easy to overlook these considerations if one appraises the situation only from Sophie's first person perspective. From such a perspective, accepting the third and fourth premises (simultaneously) yields a Moorean sentence: "I am in real-barn field but I do not know it." In this way, one cannot rationally have as one's *subjective* reasons both that one is in real-barn field and that one does not know that this is so. But this Moorean flavor disappears when one considers Sophie's objective reasons from a third person perspective.

In sum, it does not seem that the fact that Sophie is (unknowingly) in real-barn field defeats her objective reasons to doubt – her reasons to withhold belief.

The crux of the matter is that among these objective reasons for withholding there are facts about Sophie's epistemic state, about the limitations of her evidence. These objective reasons are not defeated by the fact that Sophie is in real-barn field, because the limitations of Sophie's informational state remain unaffected by this fact (since she remains unaware of it). There can be sufficient (undefeated) objective reasons to withhold belief about whether  $p$  even when it is actually the case that  $p$ . Otherwise, there would never be objectively sufficient reasons to withhold belief about whether  $p$ ! (Such reasons would be defeated either by the fact that  $p$ , or by the fact that *not*  $p$ ).

It may be argued that the view I have presented imposes a too strong condition on knowledge: am I not saying that knowing what sort of environment one is in is a requirement even for having extremely mundane forms of knowledge (e.g. perceptual knowledge that I am facing a barn)? This would be unrealistic. In general, I do not need to have specific beliefs about my surroundings in order to, say, be in a position to know that I am facing a barn.

Fortunately, I am not committed to such an unpalatable view. This commitment can be avoided if one takes into account that our reasoning and knowledge acquisition are in general defeasible and reliant on default assumptions.<sup>8</sup>

Assume that Sophie lives in a world like ours, where apparent barns tend to be real barns. Moreover, this has been her past experience with barns. Plausibly, in this case she may expect 'by default' that apparent barns will be real barns – in other words, she may assume that she is in a real-barn county environment. She does not need to have specific evidence or knowledge about her current environment's being of this sort. If she possesses no reason to suspect that the environment is atypical (and it is not actually so), she may just treat it as normal.

It is only when Sophie actually is in an atypical environment (e.g. fake-barn county) – or when she possesses reasons to suspect that this is so – that things change. In these cases, she needs to know that she is in a sub-section of the environment where typical conditions are met (e.g. real-barn field), in order to be entitled to treat it as such. So, in fake-barn county, Sophie needs specific reasons to think that she is not facing fake barns.

Given the regularities of the world (most apparent barns are real) and our background experiences and knowledge, we are in general in a position to assume by default that we are in a real-barn county type of environment. This is why

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<sup>8</sup> See John Horty, *Reasons as Defaults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge: a Critical Introduction to Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

perceptual knowledge about barns is possible without specific knowledge or beliefs about the environment one happens to be in.

I think this is an attractive picture of defeasible reasoning and knowledge acquisition, although of course it needs to be developed and argued for in more detail. At least, it is an available, plausible view that offers Schroeder the resources to overcome Whiting's objection in all its generality.

## **Conclusion**

Schroeder's reply to Whiting's objection relies on adopting a specific account of perceptual reasons. However, this reply does not succeed in avoiding the core of Whiting's objection, since equally forceful counterexamples can be devised without involvement of perceptual reasons. In order to properly respond to Whiting's objection, one should challenge his analysis of defeat in fake barn cases and similar examples, as I have done here.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I thank Jesús Vega Encabo and Daniel Whiting for their comments.

## NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Fred Adams** is Professor of Linguistics & Cognitive Science and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Delaware. He has published well over 100 articles and chapters on cognitive science, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of action, and related topics. He is also co-author of *The Bounds of Cognition* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, with Ken Aizawa) and of *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, 2015, with Daniel Weiskopf. Contact: fa@udel.edu.

**Julien Beillard** teaches philosophy at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada, and sometimes elsewhere. His research interests at present include epistemology, language and mind, and moral and political philosophy. His most recent articles are “Worlds, Triangles and Bolts: Reply to Nulty” (*Metaphysica*, forthcoming), “Equality and Transparency” (*American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2013), and “Moral Relativism is Unintelligible” (*Philosophy Now*, 2013). Contact: julienbeillard@hotmail.com.

**Cameron Boulton** is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at KU Leuven, working on Prof. Chris Kelp’s FWO funded project, *Justified Belief: Knowledge First Virtue Epistemology*. He received his PhD from the University of Edinburgh in 2014. He has broad research interests in epistemology, and is especially interested in issues at the intersection of epistemology and ethics. Contact: cameron.boulton@kuleuven.be.

**T. Ryan Byerly** is Lecturer in Philosophy of Religion at the University of Sheffield. He works in philosophy of religion, epistemology, and virtue ethics. In epistemology, his recent publications include “Problems for Explanationism on Both Sides” (*Erkenntnis*, 2015, with Kraig Martin), “A Dispositional, Internalist, Evidentialist Virtue Epistemology” (*Logos & Episteme*, 2014), “Explanationism and Justified Beliefs about the Future” (*Erkenntnis*, 2013), “The Special Value of Epistemic Self-Reliance” (*Ratio*, 2013), and “It Seems Like There Aren’t Any Seemings” (*Philosophia*, 2012). Contact: t.r.byerly@sheffield.ac.uk.

**Marc Champagne** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Trent University. His main areas of interest are epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of signs. Some of his forthcoming publications in epistemology include “Brandom, Peirce, and the Overlooked Friction of Contraposition” (*Synthese*) and “On Alethic Functionalism’s (Absurdly?) Wide Applicability” (*Teorema*). Contact: marcchampagne@trentu.ca.

**Murray Clarke** is Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec. His research interests span contemporary epistemology, cognitive science and philosophy of science. He is the author of *Reconstructing Reason and Representation* (MIT, 2004). He has published numerous articles including “Resurrecting the Tracking Theories” (*Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 2005), “Concepts, Intuitions and Epistemic Norms” (*Logos & Episteme*, 2010), and “Critical Notice: Jose Zalabardo’s Scepticism and Reliable Belief” (*Teorema*, 2014). Contact: Murray.Clarke@concordia.ca.

**Stewart Cohen** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Arizona and the editor-in-chief of *Philosophical Studies*. His recent papers include: “Reasons to Believe and Reasons to Act” (*Episteme*, forthcoming), “Does Practical Rationality Constrain Epistemic Rationality?” (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, forthcoming), “Williamson on Gettier Cases and Epistemic Logic” (*Inquiry*, 2013, with Juan Comesaña), and “A Tentative Defense of the Equal Weight View” (in *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays*, Oxford University Press, 2013). Contact: cohens@arizona.edu.

**Domingos Faria** is a PhD candidate at the University of Lisbon, Portugal. His work is supported by a doctoral fellowship (SFRH/BD/85051/2012) awarded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology. He is also a member of the LanCog (language, mind and cognition) research group. His primary areas of research are epistemology and philosophy of religion. Website: www.domingosfaria.net. Contact: domingofaria@campus.ul.pt.

**Tristan Haze** is a late-stage PhD candidate at the University of Sydney. His thesis, *Necessity and Propositions*, will put forward a new account of the conditions under which a proposition is necessarily true, supported by a new approach to numerous issues in the philosophy of language. He recently published “A Counterexample to the Breckenridge-Magidor Account of Instantial Reasoning” in the *Journal of Philosophical Research*, and “Against the Brogaard-Salerno



Stricture” in *The Reasoner*. He also practises music and comedy. Contact: tristanhaze@gmail.com.

**Rodrigo Laera** is researcher at the University of Barcelona (Spain) and The National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (Argentina). He is the author of numerous papers in epistemology and moral philosophy, most of them in spanish. Contact: rodrigolaera@gmail.com.

**Kraig Martin** is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Harding University. He works in epistemology, philosophy of religion, and ethical theory. He recently defended his dissertation, which was entitled “Justified Closure of Inquiry: A non-Reductive Account.” His recent and forthcoming publications and latest projects are “Problems for Explanationism on Both Sides” (co-authored with T. Ryan Byerly, *Erkenntnis*, 2015) and “On Moral-Natural & Moral-Positive Duties: A Combination Metaethical Theory in the Restoration Tradition” (co-authored with Caleb Clanton, under review). Contact: kmartin10@harding.edu.

**Mihai Rusu** holds a PhD in Philosophy from Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania (2012). Between June 2014 and September 2015 he was a postdoctoral fellow (SOP HRD/159/1.5/S/133675 Project) of the Romanian Academy, Iaşi Branch. His main research interests include modal epistemology and metaphysics, general epistemology, philosophy of language, and modal logic. Contact: miruss\_ab@yahoo.com.

**Javier González de Prado Salas** received his PhD from the University of Southampton in January 2016 and is currently a Teaching Fellow at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. His work focuses on topics related to normativity in epistemology, metaethics and the philosophy of language and mind. He is particularly interested in investigating the nature of defeasible reasoning and its implications for different philosophical debates. Contact: j.gonzalezdeprado@gmail.com.



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