

Lecture 22: Evidentialism

I. Evidentialism as a Theory of Propositional Justification

Reliabilism is the most widely discussed externalist theory of justification. Having seen some problems for reliabilism, we should go back and reconsider internalist theories of justification, by way of contrast.

Richard Feldman and Earl Conee defend an internalist theory of justification that they call *evidentialism*.

If we restrict ourselves to the doxastic attitudes of *belief*, *disbelief*, and *suspension of judgment*, Feldman & Conee's proposal can be formulated as follows:

evidentialism about propositional justification:

- i. S is justified in believing proposition P at *t* iff S's evidence at *t* on balance supports P.
- ii. S is justified in disbelieving proposition P at *t* iff S's evidence at *t* on balance supports ~P.
- iii. S is justified in suspending judgment on proposition P at *t* iff S's evidence at *t* on balance supports P as much as it supports ~P.

'S's evidence at *t*' here refers to the evidence *that S has* at that time for or against the truth of P, not the evidence *that there is* at that time for or against the truth of P.

What does such evidence include? "As to what constitutes evidence, it seems clear [?] that this includes both beliefs and sensory states such as feeling very warm and having the visual experience of seeing blue" (Feldman & Conee, "Evidentialism," pp. 319–20, n. 2).

This is why this counts as an *internalist* theory of justification: the degree to which one's beliefs are justified is entirely determined by internal factors concerning one's beliefs and sensory states.

To say that S's evidence "on balance" supports P is to say that, when one weighs together *every* piece of evidence that S has both for and against P, the result comes out in favor of P.

(Note: we might want to revise the above formulation so that when S's total evidence *just barely* counts in favor of P, S would be justified in suspending judgment on P.)

II. Two Objections to Evidentialism

Feldman & Conee consider various objections to evidentialism. Because of time concerns, I've selected two of the more interesting ones to discuss:

- *the objection from doxastic limits:*

1. A person can be justified in believing a proposition only if believing that proposition is within people's normal doxastic capabilities. [*premise*]
2. There are always propositions which a person's evidence on balance supports but which it is not within the normal doxastic capabilities of people to believe. [*premise*]
3. So, evidentialism deems that a person is justified in believing propositions which it is not within the normal doxastic capabilities of people to believe. [*follows from 2*]
4. So, evidentialism is false. [*follows from 1, 3*]

Feldman & Conee's 1st reply: Premise 2 is doubtful, since one does not usually have evidence for every logical consequence of what one believes.

Feldman & Conee's 2nd reply: Premise 1 is false; by analogy, there might be standards of artistic excellence that no one can meet.

- *the objection from epistemically irresponsible action*: You might think that we have an epistemic obligation to seek the truth and to gather evidence in a responsible way. And you might think that how well we have carried out this task affects how justified our beliefs are.

But then, since evidentialism only assesses the justification for a belief in terms of the evidence that one *currently has* for that belief (rather than the evidence that one *should have*, were one acting epistemically responsibly), we appear to have the materials for an objection to evidentialism.

Consider the following case (taken from Feldman elsewhere):

the mistaken professor: A professor and his friend are going to the movies to see a film. 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 the movie they are seeing was showing at 8:00 p.m. Knowing that movies usually show at the same time each day, he believes that it is showing today at 8:00 p.m. as well. So he doesn't look in today's paper. When they get to the theater, they discover that the movie started at 7:30 p.m. The professor's friend says that he should have looked in today's paper and he was not justified in thinking it started at 8:00 p.m.

Evidentialism seems to imply that the professor was justified in believing *that the movie starts at 8:00 p.m.*, since that's what his evidence at the time on balance supported. Yet, the objection goes, this result is implausible: surely the professor was not justified in believing this.

Feldman & Conee's reply: We should distinguish the question "Given the evidence that the professor has at this moment, what should he believe?" from the question "Should the professor gather more evidence?" Whether a belief is justified at a given time only depends on our answer to the first question. So evidentialism actually gets the correct result in this case.

III. Evidentialism as a Theory of Doxastic Justification

Recall the distinction between *doxastic* and *propositional justification*: talk of doxastic justification (for example: "S's belief in P is justified") presupposes that the subject has the belief in question and asks whether that belief is justified; talk of propositional justification (for example: "S is justified in believing P") doesn't take a stand on whether the subject actually believes the proposition in question.

In light of certain familiar counterexamples involving people believing things for screwy reasons, we need to formulate evidentialism slightly differently if it is to also be a theory of doxastic justification.

evidentialism about doxastic justification: S's belief in proposition P at *t* is *justified* (or *well-founded*) iff:

- i. S is justified in believing proposition P at *t*, and
- ii. S believes P at *t* on the basis of some body of evidence E such that:
 - a. S has E as evidence at *t*,
 - b. E on balance supports P, and
 - c. there is no more inclusive body of evidence E' had by S at *t* such that E' does not on balance support P.

(We could also provide an analogous account of when *disbelief* or *suspension of judgment* on some subject matter is justified/well-founded.)

Why is clause (ii) so complicated?

We don't want to require that people believe things on the basis of their *entire* body of evidence.

However, if S believes P on the basis of some body of evidence that she possesses, but she has extra evidence that casts doubt on P, then we don't want to say that her belief is justified.