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Evidentialism



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Introduction

When it comes to figuring out what one should believe one looks to the evidence. If one wants to know the best practices for avoiding a particular illness, one should read up on the latest evidence on how the illness is spread and the proper precautions to take. If one wants to figure out whether a particular politician is deserving of one's vote, one seeks out evidence about her stance on various issues, her track record, and so on. In general, if one wants to make an informed decision, one goes with the evidence. As David Hume famously said, "A wise man. . . proportions his belief to the evidence" (1748/1955: 118). Thomas Reid, perhaps overly optimistic about the wishes of some people, similarly claimed "To believe without evidence is a weakness which every man is concerned to avoid, and which every man wishes to avoid" (1785/1941: 178). To put it plainly, it seems commonsensical that if one wants to get to the truth, one believes according to the evidence.

Despite the fact that it seems commonsensical that following the evidence is the way to get to the truth, it is not easy to say precisely what counts as evidence. The problem lies in the fact that there is

a variety legitimate uses of the term "evidence" (Kelly 2014). That said, a broad working definition of "evidence" will suffice for the present discussion. Hence, "evidence" here can be understood to mean an indicator (Conee and Feldman 2008). For example, dark clouds are evidence of coming rain because dark clouds often indicate that rain is coming.

Evidence in the sense of being an indicator is obviously important when it comes to acquiring or maintaining informed opinions. It seems to be central to epistemological theorizing as well. The ordinary concepts of rationality, reasonableness, and knowledge are somehow connected with the idea of having sufficiently strong evidence. For example, it would be extremely odd to claim that someone is perfectly rational in believing that p when she has no evidence in support of p – odder still, if her evidence were that p is false. Similarly, it is reasonable to believe what is supported by the evidence. It is unreasonable to believe something when all of one's evidence is stacked against it. Finally, as Roderick Chisholm pointed out, an obvious explanation of the difference between someone who luckily guesses that p is true and someone who actually knows that p is true is that "the second man has evidence and that the first man does not" (1977: 1).

It is exactly the sorts of considerations just mentioned that make Evidentialism such an intuitive theory. Roughly, Evidentialism is the view that facts about what a person is justified (or rational, or reasonable) in believing supervene

upon facts about the evidence she has. In other words, when it comes to doxastic attitudes, there can be no difference in what is justified for someone without a difference in the evidence that person has. More specifically, Evidentialism says that the evidence that a person possesses at a given time determines the doxastic attitude(s) that are justified for her to adopt toward any proposition at that time.

It is important to keep in mind that Evidentialism is a theory of the *epistemic* (rather than moral or practical) justification of doxastic attitudes. To appreciate this difference, consider a situation where someone has a severe illness with a bad prognosis. In such a situation, it may be that the person has good *practical* reasons for believing that she will recover. After all, keeping a positive attitude in the face of the illness may ease the person's suffering. Hence, it may be that in this case the person is *practically justified* in believing that she will recover. Nonetheless, it does not seem that this person is *epistemically justified* in believing that she will recover because she has been made aware of the relevant facts, and they constitute a dismal prognosis. Evidentialism is only concerned with this latter sort of justification.

Despite its intuitiveness, Evidentialism is not universally accepted – far from it. Before exploring some of the objections that have been leveled against it, though, it will be helpful to first examine the specific details of Evidentialism as put forward by its primary defenders.

Evidentialism

According to the two most prominent contemporary Evidentialists, Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, the “bedrock” of Evidentialism is:

- ES The epistemic justification of anyone's doxastic attitude toward any proposition at any time strongly supervenes on the evidence that person has at that time. (2004: 101)

In addition to their “bedrock” Evidentialist principle, Conee and Feldman offer the following,

canonical presentation of the Evidentialist view of justification:

- EJ Doxastic attitude D toward proposition p is epistemically justified for S at t if and only if having D toward p fits the evidence that S has at t (1985: 15).

One thing that is important to note is that EJ is only a principle of *propositional justification*; it is not a principle of *doxastic justification*. In other words, EJ specifies when a doxastic attitude is justified for S ; it does not say when S justifiably adopts a particular doxastic attitude. If, for example, believing that the flowers in one's yard are blooming fits one's evidence at t , then believing that the flowers in one's yard are blooming is epistemically justified for one at t . However, if one believes that the flowers in one's yard are blooming not because of one's evidence but rather because it makes one happy to believe this, the belief is not justified. In this case, one has *propositional justification* for believing that the flowers in one's yard are blooming, but one's belief in this proposition is not *doxastically justified*. The problem here is somewhat analogous to the idea that one can do the right thing but for the wrong reasons. Helping an elderly person across the road is the right thing to do, but if one does so only to rob this person, one is clearly helping the person across the road for the wrong reason. Similarly, in the flower situation one believes the right thing, but one believes it for the wrong reason. So, while believing that the flowers in one's yard are blooming is the justified attitude, one's belief that they are blooming is not justified. In this case the belief is flawed because it is not *well-founded*; it is not based on the evidence.

Well-founded belief is necessary for knowledge, so EJ cannot be the full story when it comes to epistemic justification. Recognizing this fact, Conee and Feldman supplement EJ with an account of what is required for well-founded (doxastically justified) belief:

WF

- S 's doxastic attitude D at t toward proposition p is well-founded if and only if

- (i) having D toward p is justified for S at t
- (ii) S has D toward p on the basis of some body of evidence e , such that
 - (a) S has e as evidence at t ;
 - (b) having D toward p fits e ; and
 - (c) there is no more inclusive body of evidence e' had by S at t such that having D toward p does not fit e' (1985: 24).

Although EJ and WF are plausible principles – widely considered the canonical formulations of Evidentialism – even taken together they only provide a schema rather than a complete theory. They leave a number of important questions unanswered:

1. What *is* evidence?
2. What does it take to *have* evidence?
3. What does it take for a proposition to *fit* one's evidence?
4. What does it take to believe a proposition on the *basis* of some evidence?

Since Evidentialism (as formulated in EJ and WF) does not come with specific answers to (1)–(4), it is really more a family of theories, than a specific theory of epistemic justification. Another way to put the point is that Evidentialism is perhaps best understood as a genus under which many particular theories are species. Given the myriad of possible answers to (1)–(4), the various species of Evidentialism can vary widely. To take just one example, Conee and Feldman favor an answer to (1) that says one's evidence consists of one's non-factive mental states (mental states that one could have even if they failed to accurately represent the world – e.g., one's seeming to see a tree is non-factive because one can *seem* to see a tree whether there is actually a tree to be seen or not). This mentalist version of Evidentialism is an internalist theory of epistemic justification (See the ► [Internalism & Externalism](#) entry). Alternatively, Timothy Williamson (2000) also seems to accept a mentalist version of Evidentialism. However, Williamson construes evidence as what one knows as exemplified in his famous equation, $E = K$ (evidence = knowledge). This species of

Evidentialism is mentalist, like Conee and Feldman's, but it is externalist because the mental states that Williamson takes to be evidence are factive (one only has these mental states when they actually describe the world – e.g., one knows there is a tree in the yard only if there is in fact a tree in the yard). In light of the fact that there are additional answers to (1) and various answers to (2)–(4), Evidentialism is a category of theories. Rather than exploring the various species of Evidentialism that have been proposed or looking more closely at a particular variety, it will be most beneficial to focus instead on objections that have been leveled at the general Evidentialist picture of epistemic justification.

Objections to Evidentialism

Numerous objections have been raised for specific Evidentialist theories. Instead of exploring these various objections, the focus in this section will be on three of the more common objections to Evidentialism in general.

Over-Intellectualization

The first objection that is commonly raised for Evidentialism is that it over-intellectualizes epistemic justification. Proponents of this objection point out that, intuitively, unsophisticated agents, such as young children, have epistemic justification for a variety of the things they believe, but it does not seem that they have evidence. Those pressing this objection will point out that such agents do not have arguments in support of their beliefs, appreciation of scientific findings, or even, in many cases, the concept of evidence. Putting this together, Evidentialism is thought to be problematic because it requires evidence for epistemic justification, yet intuitively these agents have justification without evidence.

Evidentialists respond to this objection by arguing that it misconstrues Evidentialism by assuming an overly restrictive account of evidence. As noted in the previous section, Conee and Feldman, for example, maintain that evidence consists of one's non-factive mental states. In light of this, things like one's visual experience as of a

tree in the yard constitutes evidence that there is a tree in the yard. As Evidentialists often note, even unsophisticated agents can have this sort of evidence. Furthermore, there is no requirement that one possess the concept of evidence in order to have justification in any of the Evidentialist principles outlined above. In light of these considerations, Evidentialists argue that this sort of over-intellectualization objection misses the mark.

Forgotten Evidence

Another objection that critics raise for Evidentialism arises from consideration of cases where it is intuitive that someone has a justified belief, and yet it appears that the person has forgotten all of the evidence she once had for that belief (Goldman 2011). For instance, most people know, and so justifiably believe, that World War II ended in 1945. However, it is very likely that the majority of people do not recall when they learned this fact. Most people do not remember what their original evidence for this fact was, and if asked, they may not be able to say what evidence they have now for it aside from the fact that they seem to remember it. Consideration of such cases leads some to argue that Evidentialism is false. After all, if someone can justifiably believe that World War II ended in 1945 without having evidence in support of that belief, Evidentialism cannot be true.

Evidentialists respond to this objection by pointing out that the fact that one cannot recall one's original evidence for thinking that World War II ended in 1945 does not entail that one does not now have evidence for believing this. Likely, one has a lot of evidence for this belief despite forgetting the original evidence – this belief coheres well with other beliefs about world history, one may seem to recall affirming this belief in the past without being corrected by others, it probably strikes one as something that one remembers rather than something one merely dreamed up, and so on. Hence, Evidentialists point out that while it may at first appear that in cases where one has forgotten one's original evidence that one has no evidence, this appearance is often misleading.

For forgotten evidence to pose a genuine problem for Evidentialism, there would have to be a

case where it is intuitive that someone has a justified belief *and* intuitive that the person has forgotten all of the evidence she once had for the belief without gaining any additional evidence for it. Evidentialists argue that there is no such case. They claim that in any case where it is intuitive that someone has a justified belief it is also intuitive that they have evidence for that belief, and in any case where it is intuitive that someone has no evidence for a belief it is not intuitive that the belief is justified (Conee and Feldman 2011; McCain 2015).

Poor Evidence Gathering

A final objection to Evidentialism to consider here concerns poor evidence gathering (DeRose 2000). The concern here is that Evidentialism construes epistemic justification purely in terms of the evidence that a person has at a particular time. However, one might think that justification also depends upon evidence that one might have easily had. Suppose, for instance, that someone believes that a particular film screening begins at 8 pm local time. The person has evidence for this belief – she checked the screening time a few days ago and put a reminder with the date and time in her phone, which she is checking now. Given plausible assumptions about the person's background information, Evidentialism would yield the result that the person is justified in believing that the film screening starts at 8 pm local time. Nevertheless, it is not hard to imagine a variation of this case wherein the person seems open to criticism. For example, imagine that the person's friend asks her if she is sure that the screening time has not changed and points out that, after all, it is not unheard of for this sort of change to happen the day of the screening. Suppose that rather than doing a quick search on the Internet to confirm the screening time, the person in this case tells her friend not to worry, and they go to the screening at 8 pm. If they arrive and discover that the screening has been rescheduled, many believe that the friend can rightly criticize the person for not checking the screening time to be sure. The fittingness of this criticism leads some to argue that the person's belief was unjustified all along. The thought is that

Evidentialism is mistaken in construing justification solely in terms of the evidence that one actually has because easily available evidence, whether possessed or not, can affect one's justification.

Evidentialists typically respond to cases concerning evidence gathering by acknowledging that the person who failed to gather evidence is subject to criticism while denying that it is a problem for Evidentialism. The reason that Evidentialists hold that such cases do not pose a problem for Evidentialism is that they claim the person has not done anything *epistemically* wrong. Rather, according to Evidentialists, the person deserves criticism in such cases because they have failed some sort of moral duty, or made a poor pragmatic decision, or violated some social norm, and so on. The key point that Evidentialists emphasize is that even though the person's belief is epistemically justified, non-epistemic considerations could still make the gathering of more evidence advisable or even obligatory (Conee and Feldman 2011).

Conclusion

Evidentialism is an intuitively plausible picture of the nature of epistemic justification. There are, however, key questions that any particular Evidentialist theory must answer before the Evidentialist framework yields a concrete theory. Even when a concrete Evidentialist theory has been formulated, it faces common objections. However, Evidentialists have responses to those objections. In sum, while there is still controversy, Evidentialism has been, and remains, one of the most prominent theories of epistemic justification on offer.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Foundationalism](#)
- ▶ [Internalism & Externalism](#)
- ▶ [Testimonial Knowledge](#)

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