

## Philosophy 311: Problems of Knowledge

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### Handout 3: Justification and Evidentialism

As we've seen, the JTB analysis of knowledge faces serious problems. But many epistemologists continue to hold out hope for some form of JTB+ theory; i.e., a theory that retains the core of the JTB theory and adds to it a fourth condition that allows it to avoid falling prey to the Gettier counterexamples. For these epistemologists, justification and justified belief play an essential role in the correct analysis of knowledge. But even if these philosophers are wrong, the concepts of justification and justified belief are still interesting and important in their own right. So this week and next we will be turning our attention to the concepts of justification and justified belief.

The first theory of justification we will be considering is called evidentialism. Now, I'm going to lay my cards on the table here. I do not think that chapter 4 of Feldman's book is as clear or helpful as it could be. So while I'll be referring to it throughout this handout and the next, I will be casting things in a slightly different light than Feldman does.

Before turning to evidentialism, we need to first say something about the relationship between evaluative judgments and descriptions, and then make some general points about the notions of justification and justified belief.

#### 1. Evaluations, descriptions, and supervenience

To say that a subject's belief is justified is, very roughly, to say that she is believing as she should; to say that her belief is unjustified is, again very roughly, to say that she is not believing as she should. Thus to say that a subject's belief is justified or unjustified is to make an evaluative judgment about that belief. So justification is like beauty or moral rightness: it is an evaluative property. Following Feldman, we'll call non-evaluative claims about something descriptions of that thing, and the non-evaluative properties of a thing picked out by a description of that thing descriptive properties.

Most philosophers believe that, in general, something's evaluative properties "supervene on" its descriptive properties. To say that property B supervenes on property A is to say that no two things that are exactly alike with respect to property A can possibly differ with respect to property B. Once we have fixed property A, we've also thereby fixed property B. Here, then, the idea is that once we have fixed all of the descriptive properties of a thing, we've also thereby fixed all of its evaluative properties. No two things can differ in evaluative properties that are exactly alike in descriptive properties.

Feldman provides a nice example (40-41) to illustrate this idea. Suppose that two papers are exactly alike in all of their descriptive properties, but a professor gave one a better grade than the other. When asked to explain this difference, he replies, "Oh, there's no descriptive difference between the two; it's

just that one is better than the other.” This would not be a satisfactory response. Why not? Because the evaluative properties of a paper supervene on its descriptive properties.

Similarly, the evaluative properties of a belief—and in particular, whether or not the belief is justified—supervene on its descriptive properties. Or so we shall assume here.

## 2. Justification and justified belief

In our first class and on the first handout, I tried to illustrate the difference between a justified belief and an unjustified belief with examples. Feldman gives another such example on p. 39, which I repeat here in abbreviated form:

*Thievery.* Someone’s stolen Art’s painting. Detective Careful performs a painstaking investigation and comes up with conclusive evidence that Filcher has stolen the painting. On the basis of this evidence, he believes that Filcher stole the painting. Meanwhile, Hasty, who lives next door to Filcher, hears about the theft. Hasty can’t stand Filcher and irrationally blames him for everything that goes wrong in the neighborhood. Without any evidence, he believes that Filcher stole the painting.

Careful is justified in believing that Filcher stole the painting. Hasty is not. Note that this difference does not depend upon whether or not it is true that Filcher stole the painting. Even if we were to learn that the evidence for Filcher’s guilt was planted and that Filcher was, in fact, innocent, we would still regard Careful’s belief as justified and Hasty’s belief as unjustified.

But what, exactly, do we mean when we say that Careful’s belief is justified and Hasty’s belief is not?

Above I suggested that to say that a belief is justified for a subject is to say, roughly, that she ought to believe it. To say that a belief is not justified is to say that the subject ought not believe it. Applying this to Feldman’s case, we say that Careful ought to believe that Filcher is guilty, and that Hasty ought not to believe this. Note that this does not mean that Hasty ought to believe that Filcher is not guilty. Perhaps what Filcher ought to do is to believe neither thing, but have an open mind about the matter. We’ll return to this issue later; for now it’s just important to see that the fact that a subject ought not to believe P does not imply that she ought to believe Not-P.

Sometimes, people ought to believe something, but for some reason or another don’t. In this case, we can say that she has justification for a belief, even though she does not have a justified belief. For example, suppose that Careful is being *too* careful—he has plenty of evidence to form a justified belief that Filcher is guilty, but he is irrationally worried about the extremely slim possibility that he’s wrong, so he can’t quite bring himself to believe it. In this case we could say that Careful has justification for believing that Filcher is guilty, even though he lacks a justified belief.

Sometimes, someone can have justification for a belief that P and believe P, but her belief that P can fail to be justified. Suppose that Careful has all of the evidence he does in the story. But he disregards all of this evidence. Instead, he believes that Filcher is guilty on the basis of the fact that his fortune at the

Chinese restaurant at lunch today read, “The one you are looking for begins with ‘F.’” Careful has justification for believing that Filcher is guilty, but her belief that he is guilty is itself unjustified.

What is the relationship between having justification for a belief and having a justified belief? We can characterize the two notions as follows:

*Justification.* S has justification to believe  $p$  if and only if S ought to believe  $p$ .

*Justified Belief.* S has a justified belief that  $p$  if and only if (a) S has justification to believe  $p$ , and (b) S believes  $p$  on the basis of whatever gives her justification to believe  $p$ .

So justification is necessary for justified belief, but one can have justification without having a justified belief. Feldman (p. 46) captures the notion of a justified belief by saying that it is a “well-founded” or “well-formed” belief. The key is that a justified belief is not just one the subject ought to have, but one that she ought to have and holds on the basis of the same reasons for which she ought to have it. This distinction will be important in what follows.

### 3. Evidentialism

Whether a subject has justification to believe  $p$  is an evaluative question. Given the supervenience thesis discussed in section 1, whether she has justification thus depends upon certain descriptive facts about her. But what descriptive facts? According to evidentialism, the answer is: whether her evidence supports  $p$ .

*Evidentialism (I).* S has justification to believe  $p$  if and only if S’s total evidence supports  $p$ .

We can also formulate an evidentialist theory of justified belief:

*Evidentialism (II).* S has a justified belief that  $p$  if and only if (i) S’s total evidence supports  $p$  and (ii) S believes  $p$  on the basis of evidence that supports  $p$ .

The word “total” is important in the above accounts. If I have one piece of evidence that supports  $p$  and another piece of evidence that supports Not- $p$ , and no other evidence relevant to  $p$ , should I believe  $p$ ? It seems that the answer is no, because my total evidence does not support  $p$ ; my evidence for  $p$  is counterbalanced by evidence for Not- $p$ .

Evidentialism (I) seems to give a good account of why Careful has justification to believe that Filcher is guilty and Hasty does not. Evidentialism (II) seems to give a good account of why Careful has a justified belief that Filcher is guilty and Hasty does not. And it is intuitively plausible that a subject’s evidence is relevant to what she ought to believe. But there are a number of important questions any evidentialist has to answer. The most important three are: what is evidence, what is it for evidence to “support” a proposition, and what is it for a subject to “have” evidence? We will return to these later. For now, I want to consider some apparent counterexamples to both evidentialist theories, and consider how an evidentialist would respond.

#### 4. A barrage of counterexamples and the “various senses of ‘ought’ response”

Here are three counterexamples that Feldman gives to evidentialism. I have grouped them together because I think they all share some basic features, and because I think evidentialists can respond to all of them in a similar fashion.

*The Optimistic Batter.* A major league baseball player is coming to bat in a crucial situation. This player is a good hitter: he gets a hit about one-third of the times he comes to bat. Still, more often than not, he fails to get a hit. Like many other major league players, he is supremely confident: each time he comes to bat he believes that he will get a hit. This sort of confidence, we may assume, is helpful. Players do better when they are confident (believe that they will succeed), and they do worse when they lack confidence (Feldman, 43).

*Recovery.* A person has a serious illness from which few people recover. But this person is not willing to give in to her illness. She is sure that she will be one of the lucky ones. And confidence helps: those who are optimistic tend to do a little better, even though, unfortunately, most of them do not recover either (Feldman, 43).

*The Accusation.* A good friend is accused of a crime, and you are aware of some incriminating evidence. You also know this friend well and have evidence that committing such a crime would be out of character. Your friend is terribly distressed by the charges brought against her, and she calls you for support. Out of loyalty to your friend, and given the mixed quality of your evidence, you believe that your friend is not guilty (Feldman, 49).

In each of these cases, the subject’s evidence does not support his or her belief. And yet, in each of them, it seems that in some sense the subject ought to believe what he or she does, and hence some sense in which his or her belief is justified. If believing that you’re going to get a hit increases the chances that you will, shouldn’t you believe you’re going to get a hit? If believing that you will recover from a serious illness makes it more likely that you will recover, shouldn’t you believe that you will recover? And even if your evidence doesn’t support the proposition that your friend is not guilty, shouldn’t you, out of loyalty, still believe that she is not guilty? If the answers to these questions are “yes,” then we have a number of counterexamples to evidentialism, since the evidentialist says that the beliefs in each case are not justified, and hence are not beliefs that the subject ought to hold.

There is a general-purpose evidentialist response to these sorts of objections, which is to distinguish between various senses of “ought”, and hence various senses of “justification” (Feldman gives versions of this response on pages 44 and 49). On the one hand, we have what we might call the rational or intellectual sense of “ought” (Feldman calls this the “epistemic” sense”). Contrast this with the moral sense of “ought”. Perhaps there are beliefs which you morally “ought” to have but which rationally or intellectually you “ought not” to have. (The belief in *The Accusation* seems to be of this sort.) Contrast it also with what we might call the “practical” sense of “ought” (e.g., “You ought to avoid credit cards if you don’t want to go into debt”). Perhaps the subjects in the *The Optimistic Batter* and *Recovery* “ought” to hold their beliefs in this practical sense, even if they “ought not” hold them intellectually.

Evidentialists claim that they are concerned only with the epistemic sense of “ought”, and hence with epistemic justification and epistemically justified belief. Perhaps some beliefs have moral or practical justification but lack epistemic justification. If so, this is not a problem for evidentialism, since it is not concerned with these other sorts of justification.

To make this response convincing, the evidentialist must say what, exactly, “epistemic” justification is, and what the “epistemic ought” amounts to. This is not such an easy thing to say.<sup>1</sup> One answer might be: epistemic justification for believing  $p$  is just what you have when your total evidence supports  $p$ . If that were the correct answer, then evidentialism would just be trivially true, given the nature of epistemic justification. But this seems too strong, since there seem to be cases where it is at least plausible to think that a subject’s epistemic justification depends upon more than just what his total evidence is. Now we turn to such a case.

### 5. Epistemic irresponsibility

On page 47, Feldman gives another possible counterexample to evidentialism:

*Movie Times.* A professor and his wife are going to the movies to see *Star Wars*. The professor has in his hand today’s newspaper, which contains the listings of movies at the theater and their times. He remembers that yesterday’s paper said that *Star Wars* 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 to 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.

Feldman suggests that the proposition that the movie started at 8:00 is supported by the evidence the professor actually had as he was driving to the theater. But it can also seem that his belief that the movie was unjustified; i.e., that he ought not to have believed that the movie started at 8:00. If so, then evidentialism is incorrect.

Now one thing you may say is that in fact the professor did have evidence that the movie started at 7:30—i.e., he had the newspaper with the correct listing right in his hand!—and so that his total evidence does not support the proposition that the movie started at 8:00. Feldman and most evidentialists would deny this. Though the professor could have and maybe should have had this evidence, he didn’t. We will see why later when we consider what evidence is and what it takes to “have” evidence. So let’s assume that the professor’s total evidence does support the proposition that the movie started at 8:00.

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<sup>1</sup> See Keith DeRose, [“Ought We To Follow Our Evidence?”](#), *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 60:3, esp. pages 697-703 for a nice illustration of the difficulties of answering this question.

Still, it can easily seem that the professor ought not to have believed that the movie started at 8:00; i.e., that his belief that the movie started at 8:00 was not justified. And it won't do to try to say that this is some "non-epistemic" sense of ought. It's not as if he was doing anything morally or practically wrong in believing as he did. Rather, it seems—as Feldman says—that he's been epistemically irresponsible. He should have checked the paper. Because he didn't, his belief was epistemically irresponsible. And this, it seems, is enough to render his belief unjustified.

Feldman denies this: he says that epistemic irresponsibility of this sort doesn't prevent a belief's being justified. But his argument for this denial is, in my view, little more than insistent foot-stomping (see what you think: it's on page 48). Here is part of his argument:

The question relevant to evidentialism, and to theories of epistemic justification generally, is "What should S believe now, given the situation he's actually in?" Apply this question to [the professor in *Movie Times*]. As the professor is driving to the theater, it would be quite irrational for him to do anything other than believe that the movie starts at 8:00. After all, he knows that it was at 8:00 yesterday and that theaters usually show the movies at the same time each night. He has no reason at all to think that it is at any time other than 8:00. It would be quite unreasonable for him to believe that it starts at 7:30. So given the situation he is actually in, this is the justified attitude. Evidentialism has exactly the right result in this case (Feldman, 48).

Clearly, Feldman is right that it would be unreasonable for him to believe that the movie starts at 7:30. And I think it is also right that going by the evidence he actually has, the professor ought (epistemically) to believe that it starts at 8:00. But the question remains: is what he ought (epistemically) to do in this case to go by the evidence he actually has? And here, I see no reason to think that the answer is "yes". It seems to me that what he ought (epistemically) to do is to open the newspaper, check the movie listings, get some new evidence, and then believe that the movie starts at 7:30. But others may disagree...