

A very strong form of epistemic conservatism

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Abstract

Whenever a person believes that *p*, then this individual is ‘justified’ — in a straightforward means/ends sense — in her belief that *p*. It is then possible to rationalize (and explain) the person’s belief that *p* with reference to her epistemic goal: to have a realistic view of the world, together with the fact that she believes that *p* is true.

1. Introduction

Epistemic justification comes in many forms and constitutes a huge academic subject. It will be touched only at the margin. The reason is that here a very special, non-technical and original form of epistemic conservatism is presented. It relies on a simple notion of epistemic justification. This notion is fruitful to some purposes to be explained. And it yields a very strong form of epistemic conservatism.

2. A Pragmatic Notion of Justification

At least since Plato’s *Theaetetus*, knowledge has been seen as implying true justified belief. The requirement of truth is straightforward. You cannot know anything unless it is a fact. The requirement of belief is also straightforward. In order to know that *p* you have to believe that *p*. However, what does it mean to be ‘justified’ in a belief? Many answers have been given to this question. Here we need an explication.¹ There is no truth in this matter. The word ‘justification’ carries many meanings. Different notions are adequate to different purposes. Or, here a caveat is in place. There is one notion in particular that might be seen as either fundamental or completely mistaken. I think of the idea that there are true basic, non-natural and irreducible epistemic norms, or similar norms of rationality. If such norms exist, then a notion referring to them is of crucial importance, of course. Here it is simply taken for

¹ See Carnap (1950), p. 3 for an explanation of this term.

granted that no such epistemic norms exist.² And those who share this belief may want to ‘naturalize’ epistemology. If there is no such thing as an epistemic norm proper, those who hold on to a notion of justification referring essentially to such a norm, will be trapped in an intellectual cul-de-sac: the error theory of knowledge and justification.³ A better position, then, would be to hold on to a naturalized notion of justification. However, there are at least two ways of naturalizing epistemology. Justification can be understood (externally) as reliability. You are justified in holding a belief if and only if it has been formed by a reliable method, tracking the truth.⁴ This is what it *means* to be ‘justified.’ This may be fine in some contexts. However, a problem with this externalist approach is that you may believe that you are justified when you are not and that you may be justified when you believe that you are not. At least in contexts where we are interested in the subjective aspect of the notion, we may want to search instead of some (subjective) connection between truth and belief. This is the interest that drives this paper. We sometimes meet with people who are intransigent in their belief in false propositions, propositions where good evidence for their falsity exists. It is of interest to note that there is a simple and straightforward sense of ‘justification’ allowing these people are justified in their false beliefs. When we realise this we may be open to effective strategies helping us to deal with fake news and fact resistance. When we realise that those who believe in false and unscientific propositions may be rational in a straightforward manner, we might find ways of communicating the truth to them. These people may well exhibit the right fit between what they believe, desire, and do.

One internalist way of naturalizing epistemology is to conceive of an epistemic goal: to believe what is true and avoid believing what is false. Justification can now be understood instrumentally. It is rational, in a sense connected to justification and knowledge to use a method of investigation which seems to us to grant that we obtain true beliefs while eschewing false ones. William James made an influential and often quoted statement of this goal (with two parts):

There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion – ways entirely different, and yet ways about whose difference the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. We *must know the truth*: and we *must avoid error* – these are our first and

² I defend this claim in (Tännsjö, 2010), Chapter 8. For further arguments to this effect see for example (Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss, 2013).

³ For a subtle discussion see (Cuneo, 2016).

⁴ For an influential (the most influential?) presentation of this view, see (Goldman, 1979).

great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws.⁵

Now, these are two distinct goals. How should they best be handled? How should they be balanced against each other? This is a much-discussed question of no relevance in the present context. The crucial thing here is how the individual, who adopts these conflicting goals, decides to combine them. The expert on belief revision adopts her own sophisticated and principled and sometimes idiosyncratic stance here while we, ordinary folks, accept a lot of vagueness and context dependence. Given this unified individual goal, we are subjectively justified in holding on to the beliefs we happen to hold (we believe they are true), until we give them up. This does not mean that we should never give up on our beliefs. A new observation, a comment from a fellow human being, a memory flashing up may *make* a belief go away. And with the belief then goes its justification. But as long as I hold on to it I am justified in doing so.

To believe that *p* is to believe that it is true that *p*. So, if I want to believe what is true, I should not give up on what I believe is a true belief. Moreover, the more well-established we believe a belief is, i.e. the more we believe that it coheres with other beliefs (in terms of logical and explanatory relations), the higher the price in terms of subjective truth of giving it up. With it a lot of other beliefs have to go. And this is something we are likely to realize. The fact that a belief is well-established is therefore in most cases an additional subjective reason for us not to give it up, i.e. to stick to it.⁶

We may want to define 'knowledge' with reference to this notion of justification. This is not part of my project. I defend no explication of 'knowledge' in particular. Note, however, that the notion here defined allows of differences in strength. Unless one wants to have the notion of true belief collapsing into the notion of knowledge, it might be natural to require a certain degree of justification of a true belief for it to qualify as knowledge. It would sound strange to claim that all true beliefs constitute knowledge, even if they are, to a weak degree, justified.

Note that our goal (as it is here taken) is truth, not knowledge, justification or coherence. In our pursuit of truth our beliefs become more closely connected and our justification for each and any one of them increases. However, this state of justification is not part of our epistemic goal. Our goal is to have a realistic picture of the world.

⁵ (James, 1986/1956), p. 17.

⁶ Levi (1967). *Gambling with Truth*. MIT Press.

Here it is of importance to keep in mind the distinction between, on the one hand, a person being justified at a certain time in her belief that *p*, and, on the other hand evidence existing for or against the same proposition. One way of being justified in the belief in *p* may of course be to know of conclusive evidence in support of *p*, and believing that this evidence is indeed conclusive evidence for *p*. However, there are many situations where we are justified in our belief in propositions where no evidence exists or, at least, where our belief is in no way founded on evidence. Observational belief, or belief based on memory, are examples of this. There may also exist cases where we possess evidence in support of a proposition without realizing that the evidence is indeed evidence for the proposition. Or, we may believe, falsely, that something that doesn't provide evidence for a proposition does and hence become justified in our belief.

I am justified in my belief that *p*, then, merely because I believe it. Does this mean that I have *a reason* to believe that *p*? The question invites equivocation of the sort I just tried ward against. If I believe that *p*, then it is possible to rationalize (and explain) my belief that *p* with reference to my epistemic goal and to the fact that I believe that *p* is true. If we like, we may speak of my belief that *p* is true (which is, of course, tantamount to my belief that *p*) and my epistemic goal as my "reasons" to believe that *p*. However, these are explanatory (Humean) reasons for action. As we have seen, I may well be justified in my belief that *p* even if I am in possession of no arguments nor any evidence supporting the *truth* of *p*.

3. The Relation to Other Similar Notions of Justification

Conservatism in epistemology has a considerable history. Conservatism sits ill, of course, with externalist views of justification, but it is often linked to internalist notions. We have for example Gilbert Harman's famous Principle of Conservatism⁷, and Quine and Ullian⁸ with a similar defence of the position. The notion of justification presented in this paper resembles these ideas but it is stronger. A common idea has been to claim that an individual is justified in her belief that *p* provided she believes that *p* and provided *p* is consistent. It has also been added more recently that the belief that *p* must not be 'defeated' by existing evidence held by the believer against her belief.⁹ On the notion of epistemic justification here explicated there is no need for any of these provisos. Your belief that *p* is justified even if *p* is contradictory and it is

⁷ (Harman, 1986), p. 46.

⁸ (Quine and Ullman, 1978), p. 67.

⁹ See McCain (2008), about this.

justified even if you know of evidence against *p*. Even if evidence exists against your belief that *p*, even if you know of this evidence, you have no reason to give up on your belief in *p* unless you also believe that the evidence *is* evidence against your belief. If you hold *that* belief, however, then it is likely that your belief in *p* goes away — and with it your justification to hold it. The same is true if you hold a contradictory belief. Once you become aware of the contradiction (think of Russell and naïve set theory) your belief is likely to go away. This is an causal matter, however, having nothing to do with logic. If your belief in the contradiction stays, you are still justified in your belief in it. Since you believe it is true, and since you want to believe what is true, it is rational for you to retain it, given your epistemic goal.

Is it possible to believe a self-contradictory proposition? Probably not if the contradiction is plain and simple. However, if it is complex, it seems reasonable to assume that it is possible to believe that it is true (not noticing that it is self-contradictory). This is an empirical matter I will not go any further into in the present context.¹⁰

Admittedly, this is one possible explication of the notion of justified belief. No claim is here made that it is the uniquely correct one, that it captures the true meaning of “justification” (in relation to belief). It is merely claimed that this notion is fruitful when we want to discuss matters such as fact resistance. It is important to acknowledge that there exists at least one explication of the notion of epistemic justification that rationalizes fact resistant beliefs: the one here presented. Once we see that people who hold on to crazy conspiracy theories may have good epistemic reasons to do so, we can (perhaps) find ways of communicating with them in a respectful manner. We can remind them of their epistemic goal and, by pointing out and make them see inconsistencies show that they fail to meet their goal.

What if they claim that they do not share this goal? Well, it is true that there may exist other reasons for belief formation. In particular, sometimes it might be morally wrong to believe what is true. Sometimes it might hurt your own best interests to know the truth. These examples are exceptional, however. On the whole it is likely that no one can survive without at least some eye to the epistemic goal. If we do not strive to obtain a realistic picture of the world around us it is likely that we will be swept away. And then there is no room for any strive for other goals beside the epistemic one, such as improving your own position or making the world a better place. Generally speaking, both egoistic goals and moral goals presuppose some adherence to the epistemic one.

¹⁰ For a defence of this point see (Williams, 1982).

4. Degrees of Belief?

Beliefs are here treated as something we hold or abstain from holding. I believe that *p* or I do not. If I don't this may be because I believe that not-*p*, or that I suspend belief. But do not our beliefs come in degrees? What are we to say about David Hume's dictum, that "The wise man ... proportions his beliefs to the evidence."¹¹ I think we can avoid the idea that our beliefs come in degrees.

First of all, some people believe in objective probability. If they think that the probability that *p* is 75 %, then the content of this belief is that the probability that *p* is 75 % and there is no need to say that their belief in *p* holds a certain degree, 75 %. It is not, they believe that not-*p* (since they believe that the probability of *p* is 75 % and not 1).

It is true that, sometimes, when we suspend judgment, we are yet prepared to bet on our suspended beliefs. Will Argentina beat Germany in a football World cup final? Some are prepared to put money in the bet that Argentina will defeat Germany. Do the odds they accept reflect their degree of belief in the proposition that Argentina will defeat Germany? We need not say that. It is better to stick to the facts. These people suspend judgement, and yet they are prepared to bet. Their betting behaviour is simple and straightforward. However, a construction of a notion of degrees of belief, where they are attributed, say, the belief that England will defeat Italy with 75 % and a belief that it will not with 25 % is all but simple and straightforward. Our betting behaviour depends on our risk aversion and it is highly sensitive to context.¹² So it is idle to speak of degrees of belief. We can say everything we want to say without recourse to such a notion. It is also awkward to say of a person that she believes both *p* (to some degree) and not-*p* (to some other degree).

It should be observed also that belief and certainty are different states. Whatever "certainty" means, and it is not necessary to enter into that abstruse topic in the present context, my belief that *p* is consistent with the belief that *some* of my beliefs, constituting my entire 'web of beliefs', are bound to be false. It is a mark of sanity to be prepared to concede that much. However, this concession doesn't mean that you are likely to let go of any one in particular of your beliefs. You stick to it until you are pushed by recalcitrant (by your own lights) evidence or new experiences, to give it up.

Finally, it is of note that the epistemic goal is cast in a desire to believe what is true and to eschew beliefs in what is false. There is no middle ground here. A proposition is either true or false (this is true also of propositions asserting objective probabilities).

¹¹ (Hume, 1748), 10-1-4.

¹² (Harman, 1986).

5. Doxastic Voluntarism

It might be objected that the notion of justified belief here defended presupposes a controversial doxastic voluntarism. It doesn't. The idea is not that we decide (one action) to form the belief that *p* (a second action), and then come to the belief that *p*. Typically, our beliefs are not preceded by decisions. However, once you have spontaneously formed a belief, it is sometimes possible for you to question it, and sometimes even to give up on it. You *can* do this even if you do not actually do it. Given your epistemic goal it would also be irrational of you to give it up, when you believe that *p* is true. That's why you stick to it. This is not to deny that it is sometimes impossible for you to give up on a belief. When you observe in clear day-light that *p*, and hence believe that *p*, you cannot give up on your belief. But then it is not only rational when you stick to it, you are also allowed to stick to it. Even in practical deliberation 'ought' implies 'can'. And in some situations, it is possible for you to give up on a belief and instead suspend belief. You will do so if you decide to do it. Again, if you believe that *p*, then this behaviour would be irrational. Subjectively speaking, you then miss out on a truth. Yet, in some situations it is possible to do so. Had you decided to give up on the belief you would have done so.

Furthermore, your epistemic goal guides not only your direct belief formation, but also your choice of methods of investigation together with your choice of sources and experts to trust. Here it is clear that there is room for revision. This might be of utmost importance when you meet with an individual trapped in conspiracy thinking. It might be helpful in your communication with this individual if you realize that what you see as lunacy and naïve credulity may yet, for all that, be rational behaviour by this individuals' own lights. What you need to do then is to shed *new* light on the sources this person puts too much belief in.

6. Justified Belief and Knowledge

Does the notion of epistemic justification here defended suffice in a definition of knowledge? There is no true answer to this question. Neither the quest for a notion of justification nor a quest for a notion of knowledge can be seen as a pursuit of a uniquely correct answer. There is no true meaning of either "justification" or "knowledge". Think however of a particular context. We meet with a person immersed in conspiracy thinking denying that the Holocaust ever happened. We want to set this person straight. We want her to know that the Holocaust happened. We are probably not satisfied if this person admits that, yeah, yeah, Hitler and the Nazis probably did kill some 6 million Jews during World War II, but this only means that they got what they

deserved. We want to help this person to a *deep* historical and moral understanding of what happened, why it happened, and so forth, guaranteeing that the intellectual price, for this person, of giving up the belief in Holocaust, is high. We want this person to be in an epistemic state where she understands that the belief that the Holocaust happened now coheres with many other of her beliefs. Only then are we, perhaps a bit demagogically, prepared to say that this person has *true* knowledge about the Holocaust.

This is a rather strong requirement of justification, then. But note how context sensitive it is. At some other time I want to let a person know that, right now, I prefer meet to fish. Here I am satisfied if the person (the waiter) believes what I truthfully communicate. If the waiter believes me and acts on my wish then the waiter knows what needs to be known in the situation.

7. Conclusion

There is no deep problem as to what justification (nor knowledge) *really* amounts to. The notion of epistemic justification can be given different meanings in different explications and be used to different purposes. I have argued this point over and over, for example in my book *From Reasons to Norms*.¹³ Some authors have defended similar views.¹⁴ What is special in my present elaboration of my view¹⁵ is the insistence that, on my explication, the notion of justification is highly useful in discussions about fact resistance and conspiracy theories. This notion happens to be deeply conservative.

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¹³ Torbjörn Tännsjö, *From Reasons to Norms. On the Basic Question in Ethics* (Springer, 2010).

¹⁴ For an overview, see Michael Huemer, 'Phenomenal Conservatism,' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

¹⁵ The present paper elaborates on a theme eventually left out of Torbjörn Tännsjö, 'Conservatism.'

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