

Baehr on Evidence and Virtue: E-relevant or Irrelevant?

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DRAFT: COMMENTS WARMLY WELCOMED

I applaud Jason Baehr's call for rapprochement between virtue theorists and evidentialists. Indeed, I have attempted to inform the former with the latter myself.¹ However, Baehr's discussion contains some important misunderstandings of evidentialist theories of epistemic justification.² The fundamental misunderstanding is that for evidentialists epistemic justification is a matter of what doxastic attitude fits the evidence. For internalist evidentialists—the standard variety—the evidence consists of appearance states and other non-doxastic states (memorial seemings, intellectual seemings, et al.).³

So *given* a set of set of evidencing states (for an individual or course) there will be a fact of the matter about what doxastic attitudes fit that evidence.⁴ This is a theory of *propositional justification*. It issues judgements about which *propositions* fit a given evidence set. It does not concern itself—not in the least, not even a little bit—with how it came to be that the subject acquired a particular set of evidence. They may have acquired

¹ Dougherty, MS, "Realizing Virtue: A Unified Virtue Epistemology."

² Baehr takes BonJour (1985), Chisholm (1989), Conee and Feldman (2004), and Swinburne (2001) as paradigm evidentialists, but I will here focus exclusively on Conee and Feldman's explication for concreteness and focus.

³ Internalist evidentialists will disagree about whether these states have to be accessible to the individual—presumably—but not necessarily—a form of privileged access—or merely be stored information of some sort. Swinburne requires access where Conee and Feldman only require hosting.

⁴ The granularity can vary as you like. Coarsely, we might say that either belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgement will fit the evidence or, more finely, we might say that a certain real-valued degree of belief (or interval valued, or fuzzily bounded interval-valued—you can cut it how you like it) fits the evidence. A plausible candidate would be the degree of inductive support conveyed to the target belief by the evidence set.

it through diligent research (which may or may not have included a great deal of misleading evidence—alas, due diligence carries no guarantees) or they may have acquired it by narrow-minded self-affirmation.

Considerations pertaining to propositional justification—of a proposition being fitting an individual’s evidence—simply do not speak to the issue of the origin or formation of the set of evidence in question. Such genetic or etiological concerns do however *personal justification*.⁵ Judgements about propositional justification assert that a two-place relation holds between a proposition and a set of evidence. Judgements about personal justification assert that a three-place (or thereabouts) relation holds between an individual, a belief, and something like a set of standards (or something like that). As such, personal justification and propositional justification are not only different properties, they are properties of different kinds of things.⁶ Importantly, propositional justification does not entail belief whereas personal justification does.

Considerations pertaining to the etiology of that belief will be relevant to judgements of personal justification. Thus judgements about personal justification may take into account relevant features of the believer’s character.⁷ Judgements about

⁵ For a very careful treatment of these uses of justification (and an attempt to reduce them all to a basic notion of propositional justification) see Kvanvig and Menzel 1990. Either their reduction goes through or it does not. If it does, then, since evidentialism—as offered by Conee and Feldman anyway—is a theory of propositional justification Baehr’s use of cases of personal justification against evidentialism reverse the order of explanation. If their reduction of personal justification to propositional justification does not go through, then there are multiple irreducible concepts of justification and Baehr’s use of cases of personal justification are irrelevant to the evidentialist.

⁶ My mentioning this does not commit me to acceptance of any kind of pluralism of the form advocated by William P. Alston in his 1993 or 2005. Whether epistemologists suggest these properties for the same role—say, in a theory of warrant for knowledge—or not is an entirely different question. Two epistemologists, one asserting that knowledge entails propositional justification only and not personal justification and one asserting the opposite would truly be in disagreement. Also, epistemologists who believe there is a definitive, pre-theoretic notion of epistemic justification could disagree over whether propositional justification or personal justification fills that role, whatever it is. Here I merely point out that the two concepts as defined by their advocates are two substantively different properties.

⁷ And no one has written on that topic more helpfully recently than Jason Baehr.

propositional justification, however, completely ignore such issues. In this brief clarificatory note I will show how keeping this distinction in mind will clarify some misunderstandings which might be transmitted by

Baehr.

Baehr: “I begin by discussing several cases in which a belief apparently satisfies [the evidentialist criterion of epistemic justification] but fails to instantiate one or more varieties of epistemic justification that presumably are of interest to evidentialists.”⁸ This is a curious statement. Evidentialism *is* a variety of epistemic justification, or rather it is a theory of epistemic justification. So the failure of the evidentialist criterion to “instantiate” *other* alternative theories should not trouble the evidentialist.⁹ This could spell trouble, for Baehr’s methodology adverts to “evidentialist-relevant” conceptions of justification, a notion which he does not define.¹⁰ Thus, there is a serious lack of clarity at the very heart of the paper. Nevertheless, the degree of determinateness of the evidentialist position is sufficient to provide guidance through Baehr’s “problem cases” to which I now turn.

I. Problem Cases?

Cases of Defective Inquiry

⁸ MS, 1.

⁹ One other minor complaint. Baehr says he wants to combine virtue epistemology with an “evidentialist account of knowledge,” but evidentialism is primarily a theory of justification and only secondarily, if at all, connected with a theory of knowledge (Cite BonJour, Cite Conee Feldman). One could be a non-evidentialist about knowledge—a reliabilist, say,—but an evidentialist about justification. This suggestion has been suggested repeatedly by Richard Foley (trial separation, Chisholm article, Self-Trust book).

¹⁰ And what little he does say seems misguided. He says that e-relevant conceptions of epistemic justification are likely to be internalist. But the evidentialist thesis—that justification is determined by evidential support—bears no logical relation to internalism. Evidentialism is available for anyone who holds an externalist theory of evidence (such as Williamson, Weatherson, McDowell).

Baehr first describes a case in which “a belief satisfies [the evidentialist criterion] but only because the person in question either fails to inquire at all relative to this belief or else inquires in a manner that is clearly defective.”¹¹ This is a very curious approach for two reasons. First, methodologically, it does not fit the form of a counter-example. Evidentialism entails that justification—of the sort of which the evidentialist is interested in anyway—is biconditional with evidential fit. So a counter-example needs to be of the form of a divergence in justification and evidential fit on one direction or the other. But Baehr’s cases don’t even *attempt* to describe such a divergence.

If Baehr thought that there was some one univocal sense of epistemic justification in question then he could argue that it is intuitive that the subject isn’t justified in this one definitive sense and so evidentialism gets it wrong. But this is the second curiosity about the use of this kind of case: Baehr explicitly says he’s not making such an assumption. Rather, he instead asserts that the sense in which the defective inquirers are unjustified—and paradigm evidentialists do acknowledge that there is a sense in which individuals ought not be believing what they’re believing—is one that is “evidentially relevant”. The only evidence he presents for this assertion is that they are cases of epistemic irresponsibility and some evidentialists—he indicates only Bonjour—“sometimes draw a close connection” between justification and epistemic responsibility. Well, yes, *sometimes some* evidentialists draw a “close connection” between the two subjects. But then again sometimes they don’t. Indeed, sometimes they explicitly separate concerns of justification or evidential fit from the *use* (or abuse) of evidence. Consider Conee and Feldman, for example, “The term ‘well-founded’ is sometimes used to characterize an attitude that is epistemically both well-supported *and properly arrived at*. Well-

¹¹ MS, 3.

foundedness is a second evidentialist notion used to evaluate doxastic states. It is an evidentialist notion because its application depends on two matters of evidence—the evidence one has, and the evidence one uses in forming the attitude.”¹²

I find it puzzling that Baehr doesn't distinguish between the relevant differences among evidentialists. Different evidentialists have developed the view differently and it seems that if one is asserting a thesis about evidentialism in general one should attend to the relevant differences in the different species. Conee and Feldman have the most developed and explicit account of evidentialism and that account provides ample resources for resisting moves crucial to Baehr's thesis.¹³ To sum up thus far, the relevant features of Conee-Feldman evidentialism (hereafter CFE) which make Baehr's arguments fail to apply are that CFE is a theory about propositional justification, not personal justification and that according to CFE the evaluation of how a belief is arrived at is a separate matter from epistemic justification. Thus defective inquiry cases are not e-relevant varieties of justification.

Baehr briefly seems to see the gist of the points I've just made, but then quickly swerves out of the way of the point. As we have seen, his first argument for the e-relevance (a notion, I ask you to keep in mind, which remains very hazy in Baehr's paper) on the grounds that “evidentialists sometimes draw a close connection between justification and cognitive responsibility” simply will not go through for CFE.¹⁴ In his second argument

¹² Conee and Feldman 2004, ____ (emphasis added).

¹³ See *ibid.* and most recently “Some Virtues of Evidentialism” *Synthese* 50:4 (2005), 95-108. See also Conee, “Heeding Misleading Evidence,” *Philosophical Studies*, Volume 103, Number 2, March 2001, pp. 99-120.

¹⁴ I will not discuss his brief comments in a footnote which might be taken to suggest an argument from internalism to e-relevance as this has little hope of success in light of coherence theories of justification.

for the e-relevance of defective inquiry cases is that the individuals *ought to have had more evidence*. But this is not a promising line of argument. This is far too tenuous a connection with evidence to indict CFE. CFE assigns a particular role to evidence in propositional justification and draws a principled distinction between having evidence and acquiring or using evidence. This principled distinction partitions evidential considerations into relevant domains of evaluation. We evaluate that nature of the support relation holding between an evidence set and a target proposition to arrive at a judgement concerning what doxastic attitude fits that evidence. This is the sum total of the content of CFE.

II. The Question of Value

At some points it appears that Baehr isn't so much interested in saying that evidentialism is mistaken as that what it's right about isn't very important. Baehr writes

What is especially epistemically good or worthy about believing in accordance with a defective or contaminated evidence base, particularly when the defects in question are attributable to one's own cognitive failure? It would seem not much. My suggestion is not that George and Gerry ought to believe, *against* their evidence, that environmental smoke *is* harmful. But this is to say very little favor of the former alternative. It is entirely consistent with this alternative's having only a very minimal significance or value.

But Baehr does not say what kind of significance or value this is supposed to be or why the evidentialist should be concerned about the axiological status of their conceptual target. Baehr's objections to evidentialism are all expressed in terms of cases where

someone does have the doxastic attitude which fits the evidence of which they are in possession, but that someone only has that evidence because they've failed to exercise some virtue such as diligent inquiry or reflection. But this is akin to the earlier confusion of personal justification with propositional justification. In Baehr's cases there are two different candidates for value-bearers: process whereby S comes to have the evidence she does, and the act of S's having a doxastic attitude D toward a proposition p based on an evidence set E. The value of these two components are not logically related. One might have the right attitude for the wrong reason, have the wrong attitude even after careful inquiry, or they might go wrong in both directions, inverting the ideal of good inquiry, reflection and correct evidential fit.

This situation is comparable to the difference between evaluating an act and an agent in ethics. Suppose someone makes a large contribution to a worthy charity because they want to impress their girlfriend's parents. What is the value of this act? If we follow Baehr's lead we might say that it is "not much" because of the "defective or contaminated" intentions. But the fact of the matter is that while we might judge the agent negatively the act-type at the generality of *contributing to a worthy charity* is a good one. It's the act which is appropriate to or fits the situation. That the donor had mixed motives doesn't change that.

Likewise, when someone has the doxastic attitude toward the proposition which is appropriate given their evidence, then, given their evidence that is the appropriate attitude and there is therefore value in that. It is perfectly consistent with evidentialism that someone hold that it is more important for someone to gather evidence virtuously and be reflective than it is for them to actually have the doxastic attitude which fits the evidence.

I don't know how someone would argue for that, but it is consistent with evidentialism. However, it seems to me that they are incommensurable and that the ideal is simply to have both, but they are different kinds of goods and it is not at all clear how to relate them and it seems that an explicit treatment would be required to understand the questions of value raised by Baehr in the above passage. Without that kind of analysis questions of comparative value seem of little avail and even if there are other states of greater value that does not redound negatively on evidential propositional justification other than implying that it was not the most valuable thing which is not much of a criticism.

Having said this, though, I am interested in questions in what Jonathan Kvanvig has called "value-driven" epistemology and it is worth asking where propositional justification—conceived as evidential fit—gets what value it has; especially since it is pretty clear where personal justification gets its value: the exemplification of virtues. It is again convenient to focus on a particular kind of evidentialism and I again focus on CFE since it is the most widely-known and well-developed. In CFE propositional justification is a necessary condition for well-foundedness which we've already discussed. It is also a necessary condition for knowledge since on a natural extension of CFE to the traditional analysis of knowledge well-foundedness is a necessary condition for knowledge. So evidentialist propositional justification has—in addition to the intrinsic value of being doxastically appropriate—instrumental value in obtaining knowledge (or at least one kind of knowledge). So it is easy to say wherein evidentialist propositional justification has some value and it is unclear why it is a deficiency not to have additional value.

III. Baehr's Postivie Proposal

His suggested replacement for the standard evidentialist thesis is as follows.

(CEJ) *S* is justified in believing *p* at *t* if and only if *S*'s evidence at *t* *appears to S* to support *p*, *provided that* if *S*'s agency makes a salient contribution to *S*'s evidential situation with respect to *p*, *S* functions (qua agent) in a manner consistent with intellectual virtue.

This is a fairly complex principle so we will reveal its logical structure by simplifying it in degrees. First we introduce the first round of logical connectives.

(CEJa) *S* is justified in believing *p* at *t* \equiv ((if *S*'s agency makes a salient contribution to *S*'s evidential situation with respect to *p*, *S* functions (qua agent) in a manner consistent with intellectual virtue) \rightarrow (*S*'s evidence at *t* *appears to S* to support *p*))

“A provided that B” is transcribed as $B \rightarrow A$, so we may reverse the order of the clauses on the right-hand side and add a second round of logical connectives.

(CEJb) *S* is justified in believing *p* at *t* \equiv (((*S*'s agency makes a salient contribution to *S*'s evidential situation with respect to *p*) \rightarrow (*S* functions (qua agent) in a manner consistent with intellectual virtue)) \rightarrow (*S*'s evidence at *t* *appears to S* to support *p*))

Now to make it a bit more comprehensible we substitute the following definitions:

1. $E_p(S)$ denotes the evidential situation of *S* with respect to *p*.
2. *S* s-contributes to $\phi \equiv S$'s agency makes a salient contribution to ϕ .
3. *S* is i-virtue consistent $\equiv S$ functions (qua agent) in a manner consistent with intellectual virtue.

Now substituting these definitions we get.

(CEJc) S is justified in believing p at $t \equiv (((S$'s agency s -contributes to $E_p(S)) \rightarrow (S$ is i -virtue consistent)) $\rightarrow (S$'s evidence at t appears to S to support $p))$

The principle has the general form of:

$J\langle S,p,t \rangle \equiv ((P \rightarrow Q) \rightarrow R)$

So the justification condition will be fulfilled anytime the corresponding situations hold: R is true (irrespective of P or Q), P is true and Q is false (irrespective of the truth-value of R).

It is now easy to see how to generate counter-examples. All we need are cases where S 's agency makes a salient contribution to S 's evidential situation with respect to p and S functions in a manner consistent with intellectual virtue, but it does *not* even appear to S that S 's evidence supports p . It can even appear that it does not and the criterion will still be satisfied. Clearly, under such circumstances it is doubtful that p is justified for S . There will also be a class of counter-examples where, though it does appear to S that her evidence supports p , S 's agency makes a salient contribution to S 's evidential situation with respect to p but S functions (qua agent) in a manner *inconsistent* with intellectual virtue. Thus I do not think that Baehr's modification of evidentialism is an improvement.

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