Alexandre Grand'Pierre
Current Topics in Epistemology
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SOPHISTicated: How the Fundamental Understanding of Evidence Shapes our Rational World

Section 1: Introduction

There have been many efforts to shift our understanding of belief justification away from the dominant view of evidentialism—the theory that belief justification, knowledge, and rationality depends solely on evidence—towards a more comprehensive model.[1] While evidentialism captures an idealized notion of unbiased cognition, it fundamentally fails to account for the non-epistemic forces that inevitably shape how humans form and justify beliefs. Evidentialism's fundamental flaw: the omission of non-epistemic factors in its characterization of evidence, presents a misleading image of human objectivity and rationality.

In this paper, I will argue that any normative model of belief formation must accurately reflect the cognitive realities of its subjects. Because human reasoning is structured by both epistemic and non-epistemic forces, evidentialism—as currently conceived—is incapable of offering a fully adequate account of belief justification and rationality. In response, I propose a reconceptualization of belief justification grounded in Universal Epistemic Partiality (UEP), a framework that incorporates the full range of influences on human belief. Only by doing so can we construct a normative model of belief justification and rationality that is both philosophically sound and practically relevant.

[1] Feldman, R., & Conee, E. (1985). Evidentialism. Philosophical Studies, 48(1), 15-34.

Section 2: Non-Epistemic Reality

While seemingly abstract, non-epistemic influence primarily manifests as cognitive impulses or expressions of our fundamental physiological needs. Neuroscientific research has linked concepts like loyalty to evolutionary traits related to survival: loyalty strengthens community bonds, which historically increases safety, reproduction opportunities, and survival chances.[2] The same can be said for a wide variety of cognitive processes—anxiety alerts us to potential threats, confirmation bias conserves mental energy, and emotional attachment facilitates caregiving—revealing that human cognition is significantly shaped by what promotes survival on this planet. As Eric Kandel's *Principles of Neural Science* explains, "emotional responses often precede and shape cognitive evaluations, demonstrating that human reasoning is guided by adaptive survival-oriented impulses rather than strict epistemic neutrality".[3] This aligns well with research on deep brain regions like the amygdala and limbic systems, which show that emotions serve as automatic survival instincts, guiding our decisions before we're even consciously aware of them.[4]

Despite appealing claims of objectivity, humans are inevitably motivated by their mortality rather than pure epistemicism. This innate bias is not merely descriptive, but foundational: it structures cognition, language, and perception itself, making the comparison of humans to purely epistemic agents fundamentally misleading. Consider how often people evaluate the safety of flying versus driving. Statistically, flying is far safer, yet many people feel more comfortable driving because it gives them a sense of control.[5] This fear-based preference is not an outlier, but a structurally common feature of human cognition—where loyalty, fear, or

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[2] Kandel, E. R., Koester, J. D., Mack, S. H., & Siegelbaum, S. A. (2021). Principles of Neural Science (6th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Guy-Evans, O. (2024). Limbic System. Simply Psychology.
[5] USAFacts. (2024, December 16). Is flying safer than driving?

moral framing distort epistemic logic. Therefore, any normative epistemological framework relevant to humans, must account for these non-epistemic influences in cognition, rather than dismissing them as anomalies or fringe exceptions.

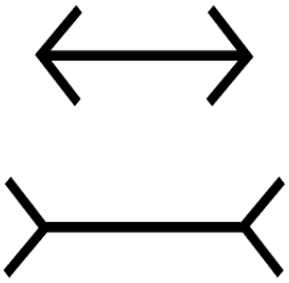
Section 3: Historical Context

There are existing proposals against evidentialism that recognize the influence of non-epistemic factors in human belief justification, but they all fail to recognize the true scope of this influence. To assess how well current frameworks meet this demand, I will briefly examine three key examples: Pragmatic Encroachment, Belief-Credence Dualism, and Epistemic Partiality.

Pragmatic Encroachment characterizes the role of non-epistemic factors in terms of situational stakes, proposing that the amount of evidence needed to form a justified belief depends on whether the stakes are high or low.[6] When little is at stake—like identifying the species of birds in your backyard—testimony from a friend may suffice to justify a belief, since the risks of being wrong are minimal. However, when the stakes are higher—such as identifying whether a mushroom is poisonous before eating it—greater evidential support is demanded, as the cost of error is severe. While this view acknowledges that practical consequences influence belief justification, it ultimately treats non-epistemic factors as external adjustments to an otherwise neutral cognitive process. It fails to recognize that non-epistemic influences are embedded within the structure of cognition itself, operating independently of any conscious calibration to stakes.

[6] Fantl, J., & McGrath, M. (2002). Evidence, pragmatics, and justification. Philosophical Review, 111(1), 67-94.

This is best seen in the Müller Lyer Optical Illusion to the right: though both lines measure to the same length, the human visual system persistently misjudges them—even when we are consciously aware that they are equal.[7] No amount of evidential correction or increased stakes prevent the illusion, revealing that human cognition is intrinsically shaped by non-epistemic forces beyond our immediate conscious control.



The Belief-Credence model acknowledges the role of context by distinguishing between outright beliefs and degrees of credence, suggesting that we rely on beliefs when the stakes are low and defer to credence when the stakes are high.[8] For example, one might fully believe their bank is open on Saturday, based on memory or habit, and plan their day accordingly when little is at stake. But if they need to make a time-sensitive payment and are only 65% certain the bank is open, the higher stakes warrant reliance on credence by double checking rather than outright belief.

While this account explains how contextual evidence shapes which attitude governs action, it still assumes that both beliefs and credences are epistemically formed. It overlooks how non-epistemic factors—like risk tolerance, trust, or social identity—can shape the formation of these attitudes from the outset. Consider the "Halo Effect", where individuals judge attractive or charismatic people as more trustworthy and intelligent—often without supporting evidence.[9] In such cases, people form full beliefs based on affective impressions alone, displaying how non-epistemic influences can generate the content of belief itself, not merely modulating certainty levels. The very structure of belief is shaped by factors like attraction from the start,

[7] Cherry, K. (2023). How the Müller-Lyer Illusion Works. Verywell Mind.
[8] Jackson, E. (2019). How belief-credence dualism explains away pragmatic encroachment. The Philosophical Quarterly, 69(276), 511-533.
[9] Nisbett, R. E., & Wilson, T. D. (1977). The halo effect: Evidence for unconscious alteration of judgments. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 35(4), 250-256.

thus undermining Belief-Credence Dualism's assumption that belief formation is epistemically insulated.

Epistemic Partiality extends the role of non-epistemic factors a step further, suggesting that certain close relationships, like friendship, impose non-epistemic demands on belief formation alongside traditional truth-seeking.[10] Sarah Stroud uses the following example in her argument:

> "Suppose that a third party reports that your friend, Sam, recently slept with someone and then cruelly never returned any of that person's calls, knowingly breaking that person's heart. Let's stipulate that this report is not something which you know to be false; rather, it is new information about your friend."

She argues that in this instance - later generalized to all cases of close friendship - a good friend would "react differently to this information than they otherwise would, or than a detached observer would" simply because the subject of the information is a friend. The central claim here is that non-epistemic demands, such as loyalty, significantly influence one's interpretation of evidence in friendship, pulling belief justification away from strict epistemic motivation.

Though compelling, Stroud's limitation to friendship restricts the usability of her model. By expanding to a Universal Epistemic Partiality model (UEP), it becomes apparent that non-epistemic demands shape belief formation across all domains of human interaction, not just in close friends. Just as loyalty to a friend can impact our interpretation of damaging testimony, loyalty to family traditions, political affiliations, referee judgements, or even preferred brands similarly skew our evaluation of evidence—even when confronted with clear contradictions. This shift reveals a crucial insight distinguishing UEP from Stroud's account: it's not that we *ought* to be epistemically partial in certain relationships, but that we *inevitably are* across all

[10] Stroud, S. (2006). Epistemic partiality in friendship. Ethics, 116(3), 498-524.

domains of human reasoning. In other words, Epistemic Partiality isn't just a normative requirement in relationships, but a universally persistent feature of human cognition. Given that non-epistemic forces, like identity and emotion, are embedded in human cognition more broadly, a deeper understanding of their nature is crucial in forming any normative theory on human belief formation. The following sections will explore how UEP better reflects this reality, and why evidentialism fails in light of it.

Section 4: Evidence Reimagined

At its core, evidentialism presents an attractive ideal: that human belief formation should be governed solely by evidence, completely free from non-epistemic influence. In practice, however, this model presupposes a subject that does not and arguably cannot exist: a purely epistemic agent. This becomes clear when we recognize that human perception and evaluation of evidence operates through cognitive systems that are already influenced by non-epistemic factors. The very act of identifying what counts as evidence is often guided by social belonging, emotions, and identity-factors that are non-epistemic in nature. Under UEP then, we must reimagine evidence not as a neutral input, but as an extension of our biased cognitive abilities.

This is best exemplified in cognitive studies where researchers present identical policy proposals to participants, either with a Democratic or Republican endorsement. The study shows that participants overwhelmingly support the policy proposal endorsed by their own political party, regardless of the essence of the policy itself, revealing a fundamental challenge to traditional evidentialism: non-epistemic factors don't merely compete with evidence-based reasoning, they actively determine what is perceived as evidence in the first place.[11]

[11] Cohen, G. L. (2003). Party over policy: The dominating impact of group influence on political beliefs. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 85(5), 808-822.

What we recognize as 'evidence' is itself filtered through non-epistemic lenses, making the traditional separation between epistemic and non-epistemic influence largely artificial. As UEP and cognitive science reveal, non-epistemic influence pervades all human cognition.[12] Therefore, a contemporary understanding of evidence must account for all influence on belief justification, regardless of their traditional classification. Under the UEP model, evidence is reconceptualized as any phenomenon, conventionally epistemic or otherwise, that influences belief formation.

Section 5: Implications on Rationality

If evidence is inevitably shaped by non-epistemic forces, then any model of rationality dependent on evidence must also be reexamined. Under the traditional evidentialist view, rationality is defined as action towards the achievement of a predetermined goal based on evidence. Yet once we recognize that evidence itself is filtered through cognitive bias, social pressure, and emotional attachments, it becomes clear that the supposed link between rationality and truth is simply a mirage. This dangerous ambiguity has ultimately resulted in the rationalization of irrationality—where actors can appear rational by evidential standards while behaving in ways that ultimately resist or obscure truth.

This is best seen in the ongoing political battle over global warming. Despite overwhelming scientific consensus about human-caused climate change and environmental harm, many political actors pose as 'rational skeptics' by cherry-picking inconsequential data points, amplifying politically motivated minority opinions, or focusing exclusively on the economic costs of climate action while ignoring the much larger environmental costs of climate

[12] Mercier, H., & Sperber, D. (2017). The Enigma of Reason. Harvard University Press.

inaction.[13] Because rationality is evidentially—rather than epistemically—motivated, evidence based on non-epistemic factors (such as economic interests, political identity, or psychological resistance to change) serves as justification for what is ultimately epistemically irrational behavior. While such reasoning may appear rational under a narrow evidentialist lens, the broader truth is distorted—exposing how easily evidentialism lends itself to selective or strategic mimicry.

Socrates warns of this dynamic in his critique of the Sophists, who prioritized persuasion over truth. Rather than constructing epistemically sound arguments, many Sophists selectively used any available evidence—whether epistemically justified or not—to support their claims. This approach aligns more with rhetoric than rational inquiry, as it seeks to persuade and manipulate rather than to seek truth. Today we see a similar weaponization of rationality, where reasoning is often deployed not as a means of truth seeking but as a tool to justify death, destruction, exploitation, and so much more.[14] In many cases, politicians and opinion-holders alike care more about acquiring evidence to support preexisting beliefs than about whether the evidence is epistemically credible.

This same dynamic appears in public debates over vaccine safety, where scientifically grounded conclusions are often presented alongside misleading narratives as if both are equally rational. While an ideal evidentialist would strongly reject this equivalence, the broader practice of 'evidence-based reasoning' that evidentialism encourages, allows such distortions to flourish.[15] Evidentialism's emphasis on methodology—the appearance of justification through evidence, while neglecting the nature or function of said evidence—blurs the line distinguishing

[13] Oreskes, N., & Conway, E. M. (2010). Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming. Bloomsbury Press.
[14] Siegel, H. (2005). Rhetoric and Skepticism. Philosophy & Rhetoric, 38(4), 328-354.
[15] McIntyre, L. (2018). Post-Truth. MIT Press.

rational inquiry from persuasive rhetoric. As a result, when epistemic and non-epistemic reasoning are treated as equally valid in practice, our collective understanding of truth erodes, and the very concept of rationality is fundamentally undermined.

Section 6: Reestablishing Rationality

Due to the current epistemic crisis we find ourselves in, we must explicitly reemphasize the connection between rationality and truth—an aspiration the dominant evidentialist model claims but consistently fails to deliver. Under the UEP model, rationality is more accurately defined as: the pursuit of truth through belief formation that actively acknowledges and mitigates the influence of non-epistemic forces. Rationality is no longer about blind adherence to evidence alone, but about recognizing the cognitive abilities we inherit, and adjusting our practices to better approximate truth within it.

Staunch supporters may defend evidentialism as a normative ideal, but by ignoring the realities of human cognition, evidentialism ultimately tells the wrong story. Humans are not detached epistemic agents; we are biologically motivated creatures whose belief formation is intertwined with emotion and identity. A model of rationality blind to these realities cannot claim to guide us towards truth. Normatively speaking, there is a major difference in claiming that humans can *achieve* rationality versus recognizing that we can only ever *emulate* it. Complete rationality exists beyond our cognitive capabilities: our attention is finite, our working memory is constrained, and our perception is evolved for survival, not accuracy.[16] Rather than viewing rationality as an achievable state, we must treat it as an aspirational ideal—a guiding star by which we continually refine our epistemic practices.

[16] Haselton, M. G., & Nettle, D. (2006). The paranoid optimist: An integrative evolutionary model of cognitive biases. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 10(1), 47-66.

Acknowledging the pervasiveness of non-epistemic influence, of course, raises important challenges. Critics may argue that UEP lacks clear strategies for reducing bias, risks collapsing into relativism, or underestimates the value of existing evidential systems. But in actuality, these concerns are foundational to UEP's design. First, while no human system can completely eliminate bias, UEP turns to proven methodologies to correct for distortion over time like the identification of non-epistemic influences through implicit bias training[17], assessment of their impact by reflecting on biased behaviors[18], and systemic mitigation through mindfulness and diverse interactions.[19] Second, UEP avoids relativism by recognizing that not all non-epistemic influences are equal. Emotions like curiosity and intellectual humility have been proven to enhance inquiry by motivating individuals to engage deeply and pursue knowledge actively, while emotions such as loyalty or fear can hinder the inquiry process by creating cognitive roadblocks.[20] Lastly, UEP recognizes the immense value in existing institutions–like jury deliberation[21] and democratic governance[22]– not as perfect arbiters of truth, but as evolving tools that distribute cognitive labor in ways that better approximate truth than the abilities of any lone individual.

In practice, UEP offers a more realistic framework for addressing real-world issues, such as the climate change debate discussed earlier. Unlike evidentialism, which simply urges the impossible pursuit of objective evidence, a UEP-guided response targets the non-epistemic

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[17] Devine, P. G., Forscher, P. S., Austin, A. J., & Cox, W. T. L. (2012). Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48(6), 1267-1278.
[18] Lueke, A., & Gibson, B. (2015). Mindfulness meditation reduces implicit age and race bias: The role of reduced automaticity of responding. Frontiers in Psychology, 6, 1-12.
[19] Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90(5), 751-783.
[20] Candiotto, L. (2019). Epistemic emotions and co-inquiry: A situated approach. Foundations of Science, 24(4), 707-727.
[21] Salerno, J. M., & Diamond, S. S. (2010). The promise of a cognitive perspective on jury deliberation. Psychonomic Bulletin & Review, 17(2), 174-179.
[22] Landemore, H. (2012). Democratic reason: Politics, collective intelligence, and the rule of the many. Princeton University Press.

forces that shape belief. For example, rather than framing climate change as a partisan issue—something evidentialism cannot meaningfully address because it ignores identity—a UEP approach would highlight shared values like stewardship, economic security, or protecting future generations. This enables the formation of cross-ideological coalitions by working with, rather than ignoring, people's existing identity commitments. Where evidentialism insists that 'the facts speak for themselves', UEP recognizes that facts are always interpreted through identity filters, and thus builds strategies that make truth-seeking psychologically sustainable. This approach has already shown promise in community-based climate adaptation programs, which frame environmental action in terms of local impacts and collective resilience rather than global ideological conflict.[23]

If we are to repair erosion of public trust, the spread of misinformation, and the decay of collective understanding, then we must build epistemic systems that are designed for humans as we are—not as the idealized epistemic agent we are not. By expanding upon the implications first suggested in Sarah Stroud's Epistemic Partiality, UEP ultimately reveals that acknowledging human limitation is not a betrayal of rationality, but the first step in genuinely practicing the ideal.

[23] UNDP Climate Change Adaptation. (n.d.). Community-based adaptation project.

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18. Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90(5), 751-783.

19. Candiotto, L. (2019). Epistemic emotions and co-inquiry: A situated approach. Foundations of Science, 24(4), 707-727.

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21. Landemore, H. (2012). Democratic reason: Politics, collective intelligence, and the rule of the many. Princeton University Press.

22. UNDP Climate Change Adaptation. (n.d.). Community-based adaptation project.

First Draft	For you to complete
Is the main claim of your paper explicitly stated in the introduction of your paper?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Did you explicitly give reasons to support your main claim?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Did you introduce at least one objection to at least some of your claims and respond to that objection?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Did you fully develop key claims? (You achieve this by paraphrasing and giving examples)	☑ ~~Done!~~
Are at least some of the ideas in your paper completely original?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Did you double check that you are representing the ideas of others accurately?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Did you make your paper's structure clear by using signposts?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Does your paper have a roadmap?	☑ ~~Done!~~ ☑ ~~N/A~~
Is your paper divided into sections?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Does your paper have an informative title?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Is your paper no less than 5 pages long and up to 7 pages long (double-spaced, 12-point font, 1-inch margins).	☑ ~~Done!~~ ☑ ~~N/A~~
Did you add to your draft a final paragraph (after the Ta-Da!) table where you tell your peer the type of feedback you needed?	☑ ~~Done!~~
After this Ta-Da! Table, did you add a paragraph to ask your peers for feedback?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Peer Feedback	For your peer to complete
Did you summarize your peer's paper draft in one paragraph?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Did you write one paragraph of substantive	☑ ~~Done!~~

feedback for your peer (answered all the questions)?	
Did you write one paragraph addressing the feedback requests your teammate made?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Did you ensure each of your feedback paragraphs is 100-150 words?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Did you had the headings for each of the above paragraphs (i.e., summary, substantive feedback, and response to your request)	☑ ~~Done!~~
Did you write your summary, substantive feedback and feedback request below the Ta-Da! table?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Did you write questions for clarity as comments in the document? If the paper was already clear and well organized, check "Done!".	☑ ~~Done!~~
Did you maintain a kind and constructive tone throughout your feedback?	☑ ~~Done!~~
Final Draft	For you to complete
Did you summarize all the feedback you received in one paragraph and explain how you incorporated it into your SAL? (Write this summary below your peer's feedback)	☐ Done!
Did you adjust your SAL to make your points clearer? If your points were already clear on the first draft, check "Done!".	☐ Done!
Did you incorporate, where needed, the substantive feedback you received from your peer?	☐ Done!
If your peer gave you questions aiming at improving the clarity of your writing, did you change your writing to address these worries?	☐ Done!

For peer feedback:
Thank you for reading my paper! This is a continuation of my paper from the last assignment, so I feel confident in my topic idea, but want to make sure that I am conveying my message as soundly and as effectively as I can. Please find areas, if any, that need more explaining/work. Also how does the content-order flow with the argument? Should I break up paragraphs and where? Does my conclusion need more work? Please feel free to provide any additional comments along the way like potential counterarguments, points you think work well, etc. Thanks!

Ian Summary: In his paper, Alex argues that traditional evidentialism fails to account for the non-epistemic forces that influence the way humans reason – such as emotion, identity, and social context. He introduces his view called Universal Epistemic Partiality as a new way to look at the way non-epistemic factors play a role in belief formation and rationality. He uses work in neuroscience, psychology and other theories in epistemology to show why his view fills a big gap in epistemological research: non-epistemic factors don't just interfere with reasoning, but they intrinsically shape how and what we perceive as evidence. This better reflects the cognitive realities of humans and provides a more practical context to belief formation and rationality. I interpret his central claim to be that rationality should be defined as the conscious effort to recognize and work around our intrinsic cognitive biases in pursuit of the truth.

Ian substantive feedback: Alex, this is really a great paper and a fun one to read. You address the prompt by presenting a strong critique of evidentialism and providing your own alternative to it. Your argument is supported strongly by a plethora of resources and you have many compelling and relatable examples to go along with it – one of the biggest strengths of your paper. One concern I have that could be addressed is further explaining how UEP should be approached in practice. We often have competing non-epistemic influences occurring at once and I'm curious how you suggest we navigate them or give priority to one over the other and how we can be rational in doing so. That said, all of your sections seem relevant and important to your thesis. I left a handful of comments throughout the paper that show minor critiques in flow or specific ideas, but overall fantastic work!

Response to request: Alex, as I said before I believe this is a really strong paper, and I can tell you have put a lot of effort into it. You provide a strong argument and I can see why you are confident in your ideas. Your core argument about needing to revise evidentialism to include the cognitive realities of human beings through the UEP framework is clear. I think one thing you could do is go deeper into explaining how UEP can be applied to real world situations. I think this would just make it a little clearer and hold up stronger against objections. However, I think the examples you currently have are quite strong as well. I like your conclusion, but it could maybe be improved by adding a brief summary of how each section contributes to your argument. Overall a very strong, well written, fun to read paper. Hope this helps.

Krishna Summary:
Alex argues in this paper that evidentialism as we know does not take into account for the non-epistemic forces that influence the way humans reason. He defends Universal Epistemic Partiality (UEP) to ensure that traditional evidentialism can make these improvements and use these non-epistemic factors. Alex draws upon several other disciplines and examples to emphasize how epistemology and evidentialism are inadequate. At the end, he says we ought to do more to better understand rationality and use practical context towards belief formation.

Krishna substantive feedback:
Your draft thoughtfully engages with the prompt and makes a compelling case for adopting the Universal Epistemic Partiality (UEP) model. The discussion of non-epistemic influences is nuanced and persuasive, especially where you connect UEP to epistemic challenges. The transitions between sections are generally smooth, and your writing is clear and well-structured. One area for further development might be expanding on how UEP still supports the pursuit of truth without collapsing into relativism. You touch on this, but a bit more elaboration could strengthen your argument. Also, you could consider tightening some of the prose in Section 4 for clarity, and be sure to explicitly link back to your central thesis in the final paragraph. Overall, this is a strong and original draft!

Response to your request:
This is a really strong paper and was very interesting read. You have a very nice writing style and which is very different from me which was eye-opening! I think your argument is clear from the get go and you break up your paragraphs well such that none of them are overly long. Similarly to Ian, I do think that you could tie your conclusion back to UEP and further stress your position and summarize your arguments that you made during the paper. I think there are some places where you could throw in an example just to drive home the point. You do this well in most places and it really makes a difference in helping understand the point. Great paper and reads well!

Response to Feedback:
The feedback I received from my peers primarily suggested me to focus more effort on my conclusion, adding examples to support claims, and showing how UEP works in practice. The feedback from my last paper suggested that I clearly articulate when a point has been made and reiterate the point for readability, revisit the connection between epistemic partiality and my new model, and generally remain consistent in my view towards evidentialism. To incorporate the peer suggestions, I added new examples like the driving vs flying statistic, added a paragraph in the section 6 explaining how UEP would address real world problems like climate change, and reframing Epistemic Partiality as the foundation of my model in the conclusion. In response to

the feedback I received from my last paper, I worked on transitions and topic sentences for my paragraphs to articulate my points clearly, added the connection to Epistemic partiality in the conclusion, and remained more consistent in my argument for why evidentialism as a model fails, particularly at the end of section 3.