Epistemology **Spring 2020**

Lecture 13: Theory of Knowledge: Evidentialist Theories

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13.1 The Concept of Justification

If the modified version of the Traditional Analysis of Knowledge is correct, then justification is a crucial necessary condition for knowledge. Furthermore, justification is an interesting and puzzling concept in its own right.
How to identify the general features that distinguish justified beliefs from unjustified beliefs?

> **Thievery** Someone has broken into Art's house and stolen a valuable painting. Officer Careful investigates the case and comes up with conclusive evidence that Filcher committed the crime. Careful finds the painting in Filcher's possession, finds Filcher's fingerprints at the scene of the crime, and so on. Careful comes to believe:
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> 1. Filcher stole the painting.
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> Meanwhile, Hasty also hears about the theft. Hasty happens to live next door to Filcher and has had some unpleasant dealings with him. Hasty dislikes Filcher intensely and blames him for many bad things that happen. Hasty has some vague idea that Filcher works in the art business but has no specific knowledge about what he does. With nothing more to go on, Hasty also believes (1).

If one belief is justified and another is not, there must be some nonevaluative difference between the two beliefs that accounts for this evaluative difference:

> Necessarily, if two beliefs have the same nonepistemic properties, then they have the same epistemic properties. (If two beliefs are exactly alike nonepistemically, then either both are justified or both are not justified, or they are justified to the same degree.)

Which properties determine epistemic status, or which descriptive facts make an epistemic difference?

13.2 The Idea of Evidentialism

What made Careful justified in believing (1) but Hasty unjustified in believing that proposition?

It may seem that the answer to our question is rather simple: Careful has good reasons, or evidence, for believing (1) whereas Hasty does not. It is the possession of evidence that is the mark of a justified belief.

This is called the evidentialist theory of justification, or eviclentialism.

While evidentialism may be correct, as stated so far it is not a well-developed theory. Let's first make one clarification.

Clifford's thesis, (C):

C: It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

Here is one objection to Clifford's thesis:

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.

Clifford's thesis says that it is wrong for this patient to believe that she will recover. And that-judgment seems to be entirely too harsh. Sometimes the good of believing on insufficient evidence outweighs the potential harm.

The point is that there are two (or more) different notions of wrongness under consideration here. If Clifford had said that it is epistemically wrong to believe on insufficient evidence, he would have asserted a view that many philosophers take to be correct. But his claim about morality is mistaken.

The central idea of evidentialism can be stated in the following evidentialist principles about justification:

EJ. Believing p is justified for S at t iff S's evidence at t supports p.

BJ. S's belief that p at time t is justified (well founded) iff (i) believing p is justified for S at t; (ii) S believes p on the basis of evidence that supports p.

Note 1: The evidence a person has consists of the data the person has to go on in forming beliefs, not of the items the person physically possesses.

Note 2: In all cases, it is the total evidence that determines which attitude is the justified one. Call this the total evidence condition.

Note 3: S has what is needed to make believing p epistemically appropriate doesn't imply that S actually does believe p.

One possible objection to Evidentialism can be illustrated by the following example.

Movie Times A professor and his wife are going to the movies to see Star Wars, Episode 68. The professor has in his hand today's newspaper, which contains the listing of movies at the theater and their times. He remembers that yesterday's paper said that Star Wars, Episode 68 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 at 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.

It is true that believing the movie starts at 8:00 fits the evidence the professor actually had (as he was driving to the theater), and he bases his belief on this evidence. Therefore (BJ) has the result that his belief is justified (well founded).

However, the critics of evidentialism (and the professor's wife) say that the professor's belief that the movie starts at 8:00 is notjustified (because he should have looked in the paper and thereby gotten more evidence, which would not have supported that belief.) So (BJ) is wrong, because it implies that this belief is justified.

This example depends upon a principle according to which justification depends in part upon the evidence that one should have had. Call this the *Get the Evidence Principle* (GEP):

> **GEP**. If S's actual evidence supports p, but S should have had additional evidence, and this additional evidence would not support p, then S's belief in p is not justified.

It is most reasonable to believe what is supported by the evidence one does have. Because one does not know what the evidence one does not have will support, it would be unreasonable to be guided by that evidence. It is almost always possible to be even more careful and to look for more evidence. So (GEP) is mistaken.

13.3 The Infinite Regress Argument

Statements of The Infinite Regress Argument go way back—some say to Sextus Empiricus (third century A.D.), others say to Aristotle (fourth century B.C.).

There is a regress threatening: You need reasons for your reasons, and you need reasons for those reasons, and so. But it does not seem as if any of us could ever have this endless supply of reasons.

A *justified basic belief* (immediately justified beliefs and noninferentially justified beliefs) is a justified belief that is not justified on the basis of any other beliefs.

Nonbasic justified beliefs mediately justified beliefs, inferentially justified beliefs) are beliefs that are justified on the basis of other beliefs.

A *chain of reasons* or an *evidential chain* is a structured sequence of beliefs, each of which is justified by its predecessors.

> The Infinite Regress Argument
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> 1. Either there are justified basic beliefs or each justified belief has an evidential chain that either
>   (a) terminates in an unjustified belief
>   (b) is an infinite regress of beliefs
>   (c) is circular
> 2. But beliefs based on unjustified beliefs are not themselves justified, so no justified belief could have an evidential chain that terminates in an unjustified belief (that is, not (a)).

3. No person could have an infinite series of beliefs, so no justified belief could have an evidential chain that is an infinite regress of beliefs (that is, not (b)).
4. No belief could be justified by itself, so no justified belief could have an evidential chain that is circular (that is, not (c)).

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5. There are justified basic beliefs (l-l)-(l-5).

Theories in epistemology can be classified in part by what they say about this argument:

> *Foundationalism*: The argument is sound. There are justified basic beliefs, and they are the foundation upon which all our other justified beliefs rest.
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> *Coherenlism*: The argument goes wrong at premise (1-4). The justification for one proposition can be another, which is itself justified by still others. More generally, a person's belief is justified when it fits together with the person's other beliefs in a coherent way. A belief is thus justified by a whole system, of which it is a part. Hence, a belief is partially justified by itself, and (1-4) is false.
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> *Skepticism*: Because neither foundationalism nor coherentism is at all plausible, and there is no other place at which the argument goes wrong, it must go wrong right at the start when it assumes that there are justified beliefs. There cannot be any justified beliefs.

13.4 Cartesian Foundationalism

Foundationalism involves two fundamental claims:

1. There are justified basic beliefs.
2. All justified nonbasic beliefs are justified in virtue of their relation to justified basic beliefs.

These assertions prompt the following questions for foundationalists:

- QF1. What are the kinds of things our justified basic beliefs are about? Which beliefs are justified and basic?
- QF2. How are these basic beliefs justified? If they are not justified by other beliefs, how do they get justified?
- QF3. What sort of connection must a nonbasic belief have to basic beliefs in order to be justified?

Different versions of foundationalism can be identified by their answers to these questions.

Descartes's answer to (QF1) says that basic beliefs include beliefs about states of mind—beliefs about how things look or sound to you, what you seem to remember, etc. These beliefs are appearance beliefs and the inner states they describe are appearances.

> Rene seems to see a tree.

It is important to realize that appearance beliefs are not limited to beliefs about how things look. They include beliefs about how they sound, taste, feel, and smell. Beliefs about what you seem to remember and perhaps beliefs about what you yourself believe are also included.

One interpretation of the Cartesian foundationalist answer to (QF2) relies on the idea that the basic beliefs are beliefs in propositions that one cannot doubt. They are said to be indubitable.

But this is not a good answer to (OF2). The inability to doubt a proposition does not make believing it epistemically justified. It may instead be the result of a psychological limitation.

There is another theme in Descartes's writings. He suggests that beliefs about our own internal states are beliefs that could not be mistaken. So we will take the Cartesian foundationalist answer to (QF2) to be that basic beliefs are justified because we cannot be mistaken.

Descartes's answer to (OF3) is that everything else that is justified must be deduced from the justified basic beliefs.

Thus, he held that to get justified beliefs about the external world you must combine basic beliefs in ways that guarantee the truth of those beliefs about the world. Because statements about how things look or seem have no such guarantee, this is a difficult task.

Cartesian foundationalism, then, is the view characterized by the followingthree claims, which comprise answers to the three questions for foundationalists:

1. CF1. Beliefs about one's own inner states of mind (appearance beliefs) and beliefs about elementary truths of logic are justified basic beliefs.
2. CF2. Justified basic beliefs are justified because we cannot be mistaken about them. We are "infallible" about such matters.
3. CF3. The rest of our justified beliefs (e.g., our beliefs about the external world) are justified because they can be deduced from our basic beliefs.

Now let's consider three objections to Cartesian Foundationalism.

l. We are not infallible about our own mental states The combination of (CF1) and (CF2) can be refuted if it can be shown that we are not infallible about our own mental states. The following example shows that there is good reason to think that we can be mistaken, even about these matters.

> **The Frying Pan** You are walking toward a counter that has an electric frying pan on it. You have just been told to be careful of the pan because it is very hot. As you approach the counter, you trip and put your hand out to stop your fall. Your hand unfortunately comes down right on the pan. You immediately pull it away, thinking:
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> > I am now having a sensation of extreme heat.
>
> In fact, as you soon realize, the pan is actually not on. You did not feel heat at all.

Objectors can plausibly argue that you not only have the mistaken belief that is roughly equivalent to "I've touched something very hot." You also have a mistaken belief about the character of your experience itself. You mistakenly think that you are having the hot feeling.

There is an additional reason not to accept (CF2). It is very hard to see why the fact (if it is a fact) that you cannot be mistaken about something is a justifying fact. Your belief could be a mere lucky guess or the result of a series of errors that happened to lead to a true belief.

2. Beliefs About Inner States Are Uncommon Cartesian foundationalism says that all justification stems from justified basic beliefs, which are beliefs about our own inner states. But in ordinary circumstances, we do not form beliefs about our inner states.

> The Beliefs About Inner Slates Are Rare Argument:
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> 1. People rarely base their beliefs about the external world on beliefs about their own inner states.
> 2. If Cartesian foundationalism is true, then external world beliefs are well founded only if they are based on beliefs about one's own inner states.
> 3. If Cartesian foundationalism is true, then people rarely have well-founded beliefs about the external world. (2-1), (2-2)
> 4. It is not true that people only rarely have well-founded beliefs about the external world. (The Standard View)
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> 5. Cartesian foundationalism is not true. (2-3), (2-4)

What is clearly true, and what is offered in support of premise (2-1), is the observation that as we go through the day we do not consciously entertain propositions about the contents of our minds. However, there are reasons to think that at any given time we have many more beliefs than those that we are consciously entertaining at that time.

The first category consists in beliefs that are stored in memory. A second possible category of nonconscious beliefs is beliefs that help to explain behavior. A final possible category of nonconscious beliefs consists in beliefs that are entirely obvious once considered, even though you have not thought about them previously.

One defender of this aspect of Cartesian foundationalism, Timothy McGrew, has proposed that beliefs about our own conscious states constitute another category of nonconscious beliefs: "awareness of visual, tactile, and auditory stimuli is often subconscious but not therefore irrelevant to the justification of empirical beliefs."

However, "awareness of the stimuli" differs from having beliefs about the stimuli. Also, it is often difficult to get people to think about appearance beliefs. Beside, McGrew's account makes justification depend upon the details of our psychological systems in a peculiar way.

> Suppose that two people walk into a room in which a chair is clearly visible. They both look toward the chair and they form the belief that a chair is present. Finally, suppose that one of them does form the subconscious belief that he seems to see a chair, while the other bypasses this step and goes directly from the experience to the belief that there is a chair there.

McGrew's proposal apparently has the result that the former is justified in believing that a chair is there, but the latter is not. It is difficult to believe that this subconscious psychological difference can make a difference in justification.

3. Deduction Is Too Restrictive To say that the external world propositions can be deduced from the appearance propositions is to say that it is not even possible for the appearance propositions to be true while the external world propositions are false. Unfortunately, it is possible. This objection to Cartesian foundationalism is the most decisive one.

13.5 Coherentism

The central idea of coherentist theories of justification is that every justified belief is justified by virtue of its relations to other beliefs. In other words, no beliefs are foundational or basic. Coherentists endorse the following two central ideas:

1. Only beliefs can justify other beliefs. Nothing other than a belief can contribute to justification.

2. Every justified belief depends in part on other beliefs for its justification. (There are no justified basic beliefs.)

   Growing Hair Harry has a generally hard-headed attitude concerning the effectiveness of medications. He always wants to see the evidence before he believes they will work. He rejects outlandish claims based on individual testimonials. He is sensibly dubious about the alleged miracle cures touted in advertisements. But Harry is starting to lose his hair and he is quite upset about this. One day he hears somebody say that Miraclegro cures baldness, and he believes it.

   Falling Tree Limbs Storm's family owns two cars—one rather new and one an old junker. Each night the cars are parked in the driveway. One night there is a major ice storm and large quantities of ice are forming on the tree limbs, causing branches to break from the trees and fall. There is a tree overhanging the driveway. Storm hears the sound of a branch crashing into a car right out in the driveway. Storm thinks that the branch must have hit the old junker.

To develop a reasonably precise coherentist theory, coherentists must address two questions:

1. QC1. What counts as S's system of beliefs?

2. QC2. What is it for a belief to cohere with a system of beliefs?

One formulation of the Coherentism Theory is the following:

> **CT** S is justified in believing p iff the coherence value of S's system of beliefs would be greater if it included a belief in p than it would be if it did not include that belief.

The intended implications of (CT3) can best be seen by considering two situations, one in which a person already does believe a proposition and one in which a person does not believe it. (CT3) preserves the idea that a belief is justified when it coheres with one's system of beliefs.

There are, however, vexing details that need to be worked out for (CT3). In the growing hair example, Harry may well believe a number of other propositions that are connected to the belief that "Miraclegro cures baldness" in crucial ways. Such as

> I just bought some stuff that cures baldness.

If we assess the justification of "Miraclegro cures baldness" by looking to see what happens to the system if it alone is dropped, then we are to assess the coherence value of Larry's system if he stops believing "Miraclegro cures baldness" but continues to believe "I just bought some stuff that cures baldness.". His system may lose coherence if he simply drops "Miraclegro cures baldness".

There is another puzzle that advocates of (CT3) must face. Generally, when one's current system is incoherent because two beliefs conflict, there is an increase in coherence from dropping either one. For example, the two propositions

> Miraclegro cures baldness.
>
> A medical treatment is effective only if there is good clinical evidence showing that it is effective, and there is no good clinical evidence that Miraclegro is effective.

are in conflict. The theory seems to imply that neither belief is justified. A better version of coherentism will somehow allow for the possibility that one of the conflicting beliefs, or one group of conflicting groups of beliefs, is justified.

However, there are two objections to coherentism that are intended to go to the heart of the theory.

Cl. The Alternative Systems Objection Here is a statement of a commonly expressed objection to coherentism:

> According to a coherence theory of empirical justification . . . the system of beliefs which constitutes empirical knowledge is epistemically justified solely by virtue of its internal coherence. But such an appeal to coherence will never even begin to pick out one uniquely justified system of beliefs, since on any plausible conception of coherence, there will always be many, probably infinitely many, different and incompatible systems of belief which are equally coherent.
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> The Alternative Systems Argument:
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> 1. If (CT) is true, then a belief is justified iff it coheres with the believer's system of beliefs.
> 2. A person can make any selected belief cohere with his system of beliefs by properly adjusting the rest of the system to make it fit with that one.
> 3. If (CT) is true, then a person can make any selected belief justified by properly adjusting the rest of his beliefs. (3-1), (3-2)
> 4. But it is not the case that one can make any selected belief justified by properly adjusting the rest of one's beliefs.
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> 5. (CT) is not true. (3-3), (3-4)

Coherentists are not stuck with the implausible claim that we can form our beliefs at will. They are committed to the idea that someone could have the belief that Lincoln was assassinated, and that this belief could cohere with his belief system, and that therefore this belief could be justified. They are also committed to the conclusion that a person could have the belief that Lincoln was not assassinated, that this belief could also cohere with a different system he could have had, and that therefore this belief also could be justified. Far from being false, however, this conclusion seems exactly right.

C2. The Isolation Objection

The key idea of coherentism is that whether one belief is justified depends only upon the believer's other beliefs. If only beliefs do the justifying, then experiences seem not to matter. And that is not right.

> **The Strange Case of Magic Feldman** Professor Feldman is a rather short philosophy professor with a keen interest in basketball. Magic Johnson (MJ) was an outstanding professional basketball player. While playing a game, we may suppose, MJ had a fully coherent system of beliefs. Magic Feldman (MF) is a possible, though unusual, character, who is a combination of the professor and the basketball player. MF has a remarkable imagination, so remarkable that while actually teaching a philosophy class, he thinks he is playing basketball. Indeed, he has exactly the beliefs MJ has. Because MJ's belief system was coherent, MF's belief system is also coherent.
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> **The Psychology Experiment** Lefty and Righty are in a psychology experiment. They are extremely similar people, with all the same relevant background beliefs. The experiment is one in which they see an image on a monitor and they form beliefs about what they see. They are told that they will see two lines on the monitor and they are to form a belief about which one is longer. They are both led to believe that the one on the right will be longer. The lines then appear on the monitors and they both believe that the one on the right is longer. However, expectations are playing a role. In fact, for one of them, Lefty, the one on the left is longer, and it looks that way. Lefty simply ignores the character of his experience and forms his belief entirely on the basis of what he was led to believe.
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> The Isolation Argument
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> 1. If (CT) is true, then in all possible cases a belief is justified iff it coheres with the believer's system of beliefs. [Definition of coherentism]
> 2. MF's system of beliefs = MJ's system of beliefs. [Assumption about example]
> 3. MJ's belief that he is playing basketball coheres with his system of beliefs. [Assumption about example]
> 4. MF's belief that he is playing basketball coheres with his system of beliefs. (4-2), (4-3)
> 5. If (CT) is true, then MF's belief that he is playing basketball is justified. (4-1), (4-4)
> 6. But MF's belief is not justified. [Assumption about example]
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> 7. (CT) is not true. (4-5), (4-6)

Some defenders of coherentism might reply that one's beliefs must conform to one's experiences. If that is the case, then it turns out that a core element of foundationalism is right after all—these beliefs about experiences seem to be in some sense "infallible" or "incorrigible"—we have to be right about them.

13.6 Modest Foundationalism

Modest foundationalism hold that basic beliefs are ordinary perceptual beliefs about the external world, that these beliefs can be justified without being immune from error, and that nonbasic beliefs can be justified if they are well supported by basic beliefs without being deducible from them.

The modest foundationalist idea is as follows: As people navigate their way around the world, they are routinely bombarded with sensory stimuli. They regularly form beliefs, not about the internal effects of those stimuli, but about the world outside them. They believe such things as that the lights are on, there's a book on the table, and so on. Modest foundationalists regard these as justified basic beliefs. They do not say that we cannot be mistaken about these matters. Nevertheless, they hold that beliefs such as these are often very well justified. Finally, they say that these justified basic beliefs can provide justifying reasons for additional beliefs about the world even if the further beliefs are not deducible from the basic ones.

1. MF1. Basic beliefs are spontaneously formed beliefs. Typically, beliefs about the external world, including beliefs about the kinds of objects experienced or their sensory qualities, are justified and basic. Beliefs about mental states can also be justified and basic.

2. MF2b. A spontaneously formed belief is justified provided it is a proper response to experiences and it is not defeated by other evidence the believer has.

3. MF3. Nonbasic beliefs are justified when they are supported by strong inductive inferences - including enumerative induction and inference to the best explanation—from justified basic beliefs.

Consider next what modest foundationalists say about basic beliefs. One feature of the beliefs that modest foundationalists count as basic is that they are spontaneously, or noninferentially, formed.

To get the idea here, contrast two cases in which you form a judgment about the kind of tree in front of you. In one case, imagine that you are quite familiar with trees and when you look at this tree, you immediately and without reflection believe that it is a pine tree. There is no inference made in this case. In the other case, you are far from an expert. It takes thought and reflection to figure out what kind of tree you are seeing. You notice that the tree has long thin clusters of needles, you recall that pines characteristically are like that, and you conclude that the tree is a pine. In each case, you get from the look of the tree to the belief that it is a pine. However, in the second case you go through a conscious inferential step concerning the shape of the leaves. You do not do this in the first case. In the first case, then, you have the spontaneous, noninferential belief that the tree is a pine.

To respond properly to an experience is to believe what that experience, by itself, indicates to be present. The victim of a perfect hallucination, then, responds properly to experience by believing what seems to be true, even though it is not true. But when people read too much into their

experiences, or misinterpret them, then they are not responding properly.

How, according to modest foundationalism, are non-basic beliefs justified? What can replace the deduction condition in Cartesian foundationalism? Consider the Thievery example at the beginning.

> Basic Beliefs: Careful's observational beliefs, e.g., there is a painting of such and such a description in Filcher's home, there were fingerprints of a certain sort in Filcher's home, etc.

Careful infers from this:

> The painting was in Filcher's possession, Filcher's fingerprints were at the scene of the theft, . . .

And from this he infers

> Filcher stole the painting.

The links between the propositions here are less than deductive. They include seemingly good inferences of the kind people make all the time. Sometimes inferences like these are said to be inductive inferences. Included in this are enumerate induction or inference to the best explanation.

References

[1] Richard Feldman, *Epistemology*, Pearson Education, Inc., 2003.