Where are dissent and reasons in epistemic justification?

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Dissent and reasons are elements that seem to be crucial in order to understand our everyday practices of justification of beliefs and attribution of knowledge. However, the main approaches to epistemic justification tend to disregard discussion and dissent, and some of them even dispense with reasons. I will argue that this can only make the concept of knowledge less intelligible and I will defend some alternatives in current epistemology.

KEYWORDS: coherentism, dissent, foundationalism, epistemology, justification, reasons, reliabilism

1. INTRODUCTION

Argumentation theories have—obviously enough—emphasised the important role of reasons in the justification of our beliefs. Putting forward reasons in support of an asserted belief is considered as one of the main ways—if not *the* main way—to justify that belief to others. Of course, counterarguments or objections may arise, and as a result a critical discussion may ensue, but that is just part of the process of justification. If, by the end of the discussion, the arguer has provided sufficiently adequate and strong reasons and has dealt with her opponent's counterarguments, then she can be considered justified in her belief.

We can see this argumentative conception of epistemic justification, in particular, in epistemological approaches to argument quality. Thus, Biro and Siegel (1997, p. 278) have argued that "arguments aim at the achievement of knowledge or at least of justified belief". Similarly, Lumer (2005, p. 213) explains that, in epistemological theories of argument, the main function of arguments is "to lead the argument's addressee to (rationally) justified belief." And Bermejo-Luque goes beyond that and holds that (2016, pp. 1–2): "Good

argumentation, and only good argumentation, would justify and make our claims rational or reasonable and, by extension, also our beliefs, actions, decisions, attitudes, etc."

There is, it seems, an important difference between cases in which beliefs must be supported by reasons and cases in which the status of knowledge can be granted on other grounds, and that is the possibility of encountering doubt or *dissent*. We provide reasons when we expect that our beliefs will not be accepted at face value or when they are rejected. Argumentation theory has taken note of that fact, positing disagreement as the starting point of arguments and considering the importance of common ground—shared beliefs that stand in no need of justification. Pragma-dialectics, for example, regards argumentation as arising out of a difference of opinion, and as a process which relies on a substantive agreement—starting points that are not challenged—between the participants in a critical discussion.

The concepts of *reasons* and *dissent* are, thus, central in argumentation theory and therefore in argumentative conceptions of epistemic justification. But how important are these concepts in epistemology? In the following section, we will see that they have very often not been taken into account by epistemological theories of justification. Then, in Section 3, I will attempt to show why dispensing with reasons and dissent in epistemology might not be a good idea. Finally, in Section 4, I will address a powerful objection to the claim that reasons play a fundamental role in epistemology, which has been most clearly and convincingly put forward by Hilary Kornblith.

2. THE SPECTATORIAL CONCEPTION

In epistemology, theories of epistemic justification have been proposed that seem to be at odds with the idea that beliefs are justified by means of argumentation. I am not claiming that these theories are representative of the current epistemological landscape, for—as we will see in the next section—during the last decades new epistemological theories have arisen that emphasise the interpersonal function of knowledge. Nevertheless, individualistic theories of epistemic justification were once the norm and are still defended by several philosophers, so it may be worthwhile to see where they clash with argumentation theory.

Let us begin with what probably is the most remarkable event in modern epistemology: the counterexamples that Gettier (1963) devised against the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief. Even though his two counterexamples—and many others that followed—are well known, let us see briefly one of them in order to examine its assumptions. The victim of the example is Smith, who

believes, on the basis of strong evidence, that Jones owns a Ford. Further, Smith has no idea where Brown—another friend of his—is. So—in a display of peculiar epistemic behaviour—Smith decides to believe the following proposition: "Either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona." According to Gettier, he is "completely justified" in believing that because he has "correctly inferred" it from "a proposition for which he has strong evidence" (p. 123). However, it so happens that Jones does not currently own a Ford and Brown is, unbeknown to Smith, really in Barcelona. Therefore, Smith believes a justified true proposition but we would not say that he *knows* it.

Now, epistemologists unanimously accepted Gettier's claim that Smith is justified in that case. Why is that so? The meaning of "justified" had not been thoroughly scrutinize by that time, but it seems safe to assume that if a belief is based on strong evidence and a deductive inference, then it is a justified belief. Although Gettier did not use the word "reason", that basis presumably counts as a good reason for Smith's belief. But what about interpersonal argumentation? Could Smith convince a dissenting interlocutor? *We* would not accept his reasons, of course, for we all know that they are based on false beliefs. But perhaps we do not count as participants because we are omniscient spectators of the story, and perhaps Smith could convince other people within the story. However, in what sense is someone justified, if he cannot convince a better-informed audience?

Let us see another example that may shed light on these concerns (Harman, 1973, pp. 143–144):

> A political leader is assassinated. His associates, fearing a coup, decide to pretend that the bullet hit someone else. On nationwide television they announce that an assassination attempt has failed to kill the leader but has killed a secret service man by mistake. However, before the announcement is made, an enterprising reporter on the scene telephones the real story to his newspaper, which has included the story in its final edition. Jill buys a copy of that paper and reads the story of the assassination. What she reads is true and so are her assumptions about how the story came to be in the paper. The reporter, whose by-line appears, saw the assassination and dictated his report, which is now printed just as he dictated it. Jill has justified true belief and, it would seem, all her intermediate conclusions are true. But she does not know that the political leader has been assassinated. For everyone else has heard about the televised announcement.

Here we can again say that the protagonist of the story has good reasons for her belief, but in this case—as Harman points out—she believes that the political leader was assassinated simply because she lacks relevant

information. And, just as happened with Gettier, Harman assumed that Jill is justified in her belief. In this example, however, Jill could not convince anybody *within* the story because they possess information that she lacks—i.e. the announcement on television. Does it make any sense to say that someone is justified on the basis of reasons that nobody would reasonably accept?[1]

Hence, these examples, and especially the lessons that epistemologists drew from them, show that the conception of justification prevalent in epistemology was an individualistic one. Reasons were reasons *for oneself*, and the fact that those reasons would not be accepted by better-informed people had no bearing on the question of justification. The presence of reasons and an individualistic approach are precisely what characterised classical foundationalism. Descartes, probably the clearest example of foundationalism in epistemology, urged us to examine—by ourselves—our whole system of beliefs and to dispense with everything but those ideas that were "clear and distinct" in our minds. Then, those beliefs could serve as reasons that justify other beliefs that follow necessarily from the former. Justification, therefore, was achieved by a single individual by means of introspection. One could say that there were reasons—even though often that word was not explicitly used—but there was nobody with whom to share them. This can also be seen in more recent foundationalist theories, such as Chisholm's (1989, p. 7): "If a person S is *internally justified* in believing a certain thing, then this may be something he can know just by reflecting upon his own state of mind."

If theories of knowledge before the publication of Gettier's paper were largely characterised by the consideration of reasons and the absence of actual argumentation, many reactions to Gettier's counterexamples got rid of reasons altogether. This is true particularly of externalist conceptions of epistemic justification. According to externalists, beliefs are justified by features of the world of which the epistemic agent may not even be aware. For instance, Goldman (1967) noticed that, in Gettier's second example—explained above—Smith does *not* believe the proposition "Either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona" *because* Brown is in Barcelona, even though *that* is what makes it true. That is, there is no *causal* connection between the fact that Brown is in Barcelona and Smith's believing that proposition. He therefore attempted to solve the problem by proposing a *causal theory* of (empirical) knowledge, according to which (p. 369): 'S knows that p if

[1] In a discussion on these counterexamples, Meeker (2004) argues that Jill lacks justification because she does not believe a proposition which she is socially expected to believe.

and only if the fact p is causally connected in an "appropriate" way with S's believing p.'

As is well known, Goldman (1976) himself pointed out a flaw in his theory of causal connection—with his famous counterexample of the barn façades—and replaced it with a reliabilist theory. According to his new proposal, "a person is said to know that p just in case he *distinguishes* or *discriminates* the truth of *p* from relevant alternatives" (p. 772). Reliabilism is sometimes presented as paradigmatic of externalist theories of knowledge, for as long as the epistemic agent is reliable, she does not need to be aware of her own reliability in order to know. Hence, any idea of reasons is absent in this approach. As Goldman himself explains, when comparing his theory to the Cartesian perspective (p. 790):

> My theory requires no justification for external-world propositions that derives entirely from self-warranting propositions. It requires only, in effect, that beliefs in the external world be suitably caused.

Apart from foundationalism and reliabilism, epistemologists have also proposed coherentist theories of epistemic justification. According to these theories, justification is a matter of the coherence of a belief with the epistemic agent's system of beliefs. Coherentist theories tend to be internalist and therefore, as in foundationalism, reasons enter into the picture—only under a different guise. Bonjour, for example, argued that the structure of epistemic justification is not linear, as foundationalist theories assume; instead, justification "is essentially systematic or holistic in character: beliefs are justified by being inferentially related to other beliefs in the overall context of a coherent system" (1985, p. 90). But, despite this difference in structure, foundationalism and coherentism are similar in that both conceive of justification as individualistic and as involving reasons. Bonjour was especially critical of externalist theories and insisted that, in order to prevent irrationally formed beliefs, the epistemic agent must be aware of *her reasons* for those beliefs. However, those reasons were reasons *for herself*, and no mention was made of actual argumentation in Bonjour's characterisation of justification.

Lehrer's (1990) coherentist theory came very close to be an exception to this trend. He started with the concept of *personal justification*, which he defined as follows (p. 115): "*S* is personally justified in accepting that *p* at *t* if and only if *p* coheres with the acceptance system of *S* at *t*." For a belief to cohere with someone's acceptance system—i.e. the set of statements that she accepts as true—accepting that belief must be more reasonable that accepting any

competing claim on the basis of that acceptance system (p. 117). In order to determine this, Lehrer devised a game in which the epistemic agent must answer to sceptical questions. As he explained (p. 119):

> The justification game is played in the following way. The claimant presents something she accepts as true. The skeptic may then raise any objection in the form of a competitor of what the claimant presents. If what the claimant accepts is something that is more reasonable for her to accept than the skeptical objection, that is, if the competitor cited by the skeptic is beaten, then the claimant wins the round. If all the competitors raised by the skeptic are beaten, then the claimant wins the game. If she wins the game, she is personally justified in accepting what she presented; if not, she is not personally justified. The game is a heuristic device for understanding the considerations that make a person justified in accepting something rather than a psychological model of mental processes.

Here, in effect, we have dissent and exchange of reasons. What Lehrer describes is not, however, a real critical discussion. It is simply a "heuristic device" that the agent can use in order to imagine potential competitors to the statement that she is wondering whether to accept. That is: it only happens in the agent's head.

What do all these epistemological frameworks—foundationalism, reliabilism and coherentism—have in common? As Leite (2004) argues, they all focus on the *state* of being justified, rather than the activity of justifying a claim. He explains (p. 222):

> According to these theories, the justificatory status of a person's belief is determined by certain facts which obtain prior to and independently of the activity of justifying. The activity itself plays no role in determining justificatory status; it is simply a secondary and optional matter of attempting to determine and report, as far as is conversationally necessary, the prior and independent facts which determine the justificatory status of one's belief.

He calls this view of epistemic justification *the Spectatorial Conception*. It explains why, in the theories that I have surveyed here, even if certain conception of reasons plays a role, no reference is made to actual argumentation and dissent. The epistemic agent's attempts to justify her belief to others may be successful or go badly wrong, or the agent may even be too tired or too stupid to formulate an argument—as Bonjour (1985, p. 20) puts it—but this has no effect on the justification of her beliefs. Beliefs, in this conception, simply *are* justified or unjustified, and

the activity of supporting them by arguments would amount to no more than an attempt to report their already established justification.

A weakness of the Spectatorial Conception has already transpired here. It forces us to say, in Gettier's counterexamples, that Smith is justified, even though *we* would not accept his reasons; and, in Harman's counterexample, that Jill is justified, even though *everybody else* could counter her argument for her belief. Leite (2004, p. 227) adds to this that "in dismissing our overt deliberative and justificatory activities, the Spectatorial Conception loses sight of the very idea of *a person's holding a belief for a reason*." In particular, he argues that those approaches to epistemic justification do not give an adequate account of what it is to *commit oneself* to reasons and to be *accountable* for them. I believe he is right, and moreover I think there are reasons to suspect that the Spectatorial Conception loses sight of the very point of our concept of knowledge. In the next sections I will discuss the role of knowledge and reasons in our lives in order to show why this might be so.

3. WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE FOR?

As we have seen, what mainly characterises traditional epistemological theories is that they are essentially individualistic. Epistemic justification is something that accrues to a single agent in virtue of her mental states or her relationship with the environment. As a consequence, even if some theories acknowledge the role of reasons in epistemic justification—as is generally the case in internalist perspectives—actual interpersonal argumentation has no relevant place in that framework.

Recently, however, certain epistemological theories have been proposed that are based on the consideration of what is the main purpose of our human concept of knowledge, and these theories have emphasised the social and interpersonal character of knowledge. Edward Craig (1990), who initiated this line of research, argues that in order to understand "knowledge" we must ask ourselves why we would need that concept (p. 3): "Knowledge is not a given phenomenon, but something that we delineate by operating with a concept which we create in answer to certain needs, or in pursuit of certain ideals." What needs or ideals are those? Craig explains that a basic need for all human beings is the need for true beliefs, and in order to acquire those true beliefs we very often rely on good informants. This leads to the need to evaluate potential informants. Thus, his hypothesis is that "the concept of knowledge is used to flag approved sources of information" (p. 11).

Traditional epistemology has focused on the issue of what, given a true belief, should be added for it to constitute knowledge. Craig's

starting point, on the contrary, is the more ordinary one of an inquirer who does not yet have a true belief and seeks to get it from someone else—because she cannot find out for herself or simply because that would be less efficient. The inquirer, therefore, needs someone who will sincerely tell her the truth and who will very likely be right about that. Moreover, the informant must possess "some detectable property that is a good indicator of true belief on the matter under discussion" (p. 26). Craig deliberately avoids any further specification of what kind of property that must be, for—he says (p. 27)—there could be many different answers to that question, depending on the issue under investigation. Rather, he shows how different epistemological accounts—whether based on agent reliability, tracking of the facts, causal connections, or reasons—can have a place in his own approach. What really matters to him is that the property that indicates that the informant is reliable should be *detectable* so that the inquirer can identify it.

Following in Craig's steps, Hannon (2019) develops a function-first epistemology which provides "a deeply social picture of knowledge, one that places our reliance on others at center stage" (p. 4). He emphasises the idea of *reliability* much more than Craig, who writes indistinctly about "good informants" or "reliable informants"—although, of course, it is the reliability of *informants* that matters here, not of their cognitive processes. Thus, Hannon holds that "the primary function of the concept of knowledge is to identify informants who are reliable enough to appropriately serve as sources of actionable information for members of our community" (p. 13). Hence, both in Craig's and Hannon's accounts, knowledge is not something that the epistemologist grants to an isolated individual, but something that people attribute to each other when they evaluate each other as informants.

Here, then, we have an inverse picture to that of foundationalism and coherentism: knowledge becomes an intrinsically social concept, but the centrality of reasons disappears. I believe that that is an improvement. After all—as has already been pointed out in the Introduction—reasons are not *always* necessary for knowledge. Craig, however, acknowledges that an account of epistemic justification in terms of reasons is not off the mark (1990, p. 31):

> There are good grounds for thinking that where the minimal concept of the good informant applies, there, very nearly always, we will find true belief with a good reason as well, provided only that the notion of having a reason for a belief is not taken too strictly.

The social, interpersonal dimension, on the other hand, is taken into account by these theorists, and rightly so because that seems to be

inherent in the concept of knowledge. At least, that seems to be the case in the light of recent hypotheses about the evolution of human cognition that link it to the development of cooperation and communication. Tomasello (2014), for example, argues that human thinking itself is the result of social interaction and coordination in cooperative activities. According to him, what makes human thinking unique is that it is aimed at coordinating with others in order to achieve shared goals. Tomasello's main thesis is that our form of thinking evolved in two steps. First, in the context of small-scale collaborative activities, early humans evolved the ability to coordinate in a way characterised *by joint intentionality*, that is, joint goals and joint attention (p. 33) as well as a division of labour and individual roles (p. 40). Among other things, the cognitive mechanisms of joint intentionality produced an understanding of other people's *perspectives* on the same situation, a primitive notion of *truth* rooted in the idea of cooperative informative communication, and the origins of our concept of *rationality* in the form of "social self-monitoring for intelligibility in cooperative communication" (p. 58).

The second evolutionary step that, according to Tomasello, led to modern human thinking, involves the transition from temporary and *ad hoc* collaborative activities to full cultural organisation of large groups. Humans began thinking in terms of the group and created conventional cultural practices—including social norms and teaching. Some of the results of this were the creation of a sense of *objectivity* as the "collectively accepted perspectives on things" (p. 92), linguistic devices that indicate *epistemic attitudes* such as believing or doubting (p. 103), and a system of communicative conventions that allows for inferences and therefore for argumentation and reasoning. Here, Tomasello explains, "reasoning" means "to explicate in conventional form—for others or oneself—the reasons why one is thinking what one is thinking" (p. 110).

Hence, our most important epistemic concepts, such as those of *truth* and of *belief*, may have arisen in human thinking as a result of cooperative activities and social life. We can, of course, apply epistemic concepts in solitary thinking, but, as Tomasello remarks, solitary thinking is like playing jazz in privacy (p. 1): "It is a solitary activity all right, but on an instrument made by others for that general purpose, after years of playing with and learning from other practitioners, in a musical genre with a rich history of legendary riffs, for an imagined audience of jazz aficionados." Other accounts of the evolution of human beings have also emphasised the crucial role that information sharing has played in shaping our modern ways of thinking and our cognitive capacities (cf. Sterelny, 2012).

Now, what about reasons? Just as reasons are not always necessary for knowledge, they sometimes seem to be required if

someone's belief is to be recognised as knowledge. Perceptual beliefs or beliefs that are based on the expertise of an authority can, in most cases, be admitted without reasons, but in many other cases the question arises: "How do you know?" No new scientific hypothesis would be accepted without reasons, and if someone told me that a cat is stealing my food at night I would certainly ask him to support that claim.

According to Sperber et al (2010), human beings possess cognitive mechanisms for *epistemic vigilance*, that is, the capacity to assess whether we should believe a piece of information that is transmitted to us by someone. This assessment is based on the trustworthiness of the informant and the believability of the information. So far, it seems that a social reliabilist account—such as Craig's—could explain the transmission of knowledge. However, there are many claims that would not be accepted on trust alone—and that is true especially in our modern, globalised societies. In those cases, *argumentation* will serve to convince an epistemically vigilant listener.

Mercier and Sperber (2017) also admit that (p. 8): "Our skills and our general knowledge owe less to individual experience than to social transmission." But they point out that epistemic vigilance is not enough to explain this transmission: we also need reasons. They have convincingly argued that our capacity of reason evolved precisely with the purpose of producing arguments designed to convince others and evaluating arguments that are aimed at convincing us. It helps in the transmission of knowledge which would otherwise be halted by epistemic vigilance. As the authors say (p. 194):

> The argumentative use of reasons helps genuine information cross the bottleneck that epistemic vigilance creates in the social flow of information. It is beneficial to addressees by allowing them to better evaluate possibly valuable information that they would not accept on trust. It is beneficial to communicators by allowing them to convince a cautious audience.

What this shows, in my view, is, first, that epistemological theories that dispense with the notion of reasons—such as reliabilism—miss an important part of human knowledge; and, second, that those theories that do take reasons into account—such as foundationalism and coherentism—must also consider them in the context of public, interpersonal argumentation. Reasoning, according to Mercier and Sperber, is not an inherently solitary activity; rather, it is "first and foremost a social competence" (p. 11). It takes place mainly in interactions with other people and consists in the production and evaluation of reasons.

Therefore, no theory of epistemic justification that ignores the importance of reasons, of interpersonal argumentation, and of dissent, can be complete. For these reasons, I believe that recent epistemological theories that focus on the activity of justifying beliefs through the exchange of reasons are on the right track. In his well-known criticism of the foundationalist view of epistemic justification as based on basic observational claims, Sellars (1991, p. 169) held that knowledge is a normative category that involves justification by means of reasons:

> The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.

Brandom (1994) famously developed this idea into a whole account of the practice of epistemic justification based on the exchange of reasons. He takes into account both the fact that certain beliefs constitute knowledge because the agent is reliable, and the fact that many other beliefs must be justified with reasons if we are to concede that the agents knows. Instead of beliefs, Brandom talks about assertions, which are "implicit knowledge claims" (p. 201). He explains our linguistic and epistemic practices in terms of *entitlements* and *commitments* (p. 159). By doing so, he puts assertions in a web of inferential relations: by committing himself to an assertion to which one is entitled, one thereby also commits himself to what follows from that and entitles others to commit themselves to that assertion. Thus, Brandon defines knowledge in these terms: "In taking someone to be a knower, one *attributes* a *commitment*, *attributes entitlement* to that commitment, and *acknowledges commitment* to the same content oneself" (p. 202).

What mostly interests us here is that Brandom distinguishes between two senses of justification (p. 204):

> In one sense, to call a belief justified is to invoke its relation to the process of *justifying* it. To *be* justified in this sense is to *have been* justified—exhibited as the conclusion of an inference of a certain kind. In another sense, to call a belief justified is to attribute to it what might be called *positive justificatory status*. Positive justificatory status is just what has been talked about here in terms of *entitlement* to a claim.

Justification can be, then, an activity of showing inferential connections or a default status. Foundationalism and coherentism focus on the former, while reliabilism focus on the latter. In both cases, however,

entitlements and commitments are *attributed* by some people to other people, so knowledge remains a social concept.

As we have seen in the previous section, Leite criticises standard accounts of epistemic justification—what he calls the Spectatorial Conception. His proposal, which I regard as akin to Brandon's (1994, p. 204) dynamic model of "default and challenge", is that epistemic justification is something that takes place in the activity of giving and asking for reasons itself—not a condition that obtains before that. As Leite (2004, p. 239) puts it: "successfully justifying a belief is more like achieving a checkmate than like showing or reporting that one has won the game." Therefore, he proposes the following definition of justification (p. 242): "to be justified is to be able to draw upon one's background conception of the world in order to defend one's belief by basing it upon objectively adequate reasons and providing objectively good reasons against certain objections."

I believe it is theories of this kind—which put knowledge in a social context and take into account the role of reasons—that do justice to what we know nowadays about the role of knowledge in human societies and the function for which human reason evolved. On the basis of those theories of epistemic justification, giving reasons is often required for a claim to knowledge to be accepted, and it is here that argumentation theory could be very relevant to epistemology.

4. KORNBLITH'S CHALLENGE

If the picture that I sketched in the previous section is not misguided, then reasons have an important role to play in epistemic justification, and moreover they primarily play that role in the context of interpersonal argumentation. However, the idea that reasons are central in epistemic justification has been challenged. In this last section, I will discuss—as briefly as possible—a powerful objection to the centrality of reasons in epistemology that has been formulated by Hilary Kornblith.

In *On Reflection*, Kornblith criticises the idea that reflective scrutiny of our beliefs and our reasons is essential to knowledge. His objections are not merely theoretical, but also empirical—and I will focus on the latter. Contrary to common sense and to many epistemological theories, such as Bonjour's and Sosa's, he argues that reflection does not improve the quality of our beliefs. On the basis of overwhelming and compelling empirical evidence, Kornblith claims (2012, p. 3):

> In a very wide range of important cases, reflective scrutiny of our first-order beliefs does not allow us to recognize our errors and then correct them; instead, it gives us the

> misleading impression that first-order beliefs which are in fact mistaken and which were in fact arrived at in terribly unreliable ways, are perfectly accurate and were arrived at in a fully reliable manner.

In order to be brief, let me say at once that this may well be true but it does not affect the view I am defending here. Kornblith is suspicious of reflection—and, as a matter of fact, so am I. Hence I am very sympathetic to his concerns in this regard. That is why I have argued in favour of a consideration of reasons that puts them in the context of argumentation and dissent, instead of solitary reflection. However, Kornblith would not be convinced by this change of setting, for he argues that human beings are also unreliable when we report our reasons for our beliefs. He says (p. 21):

> If you ask people why they hold the beliefs they do, then, in a very wide variety of cases, they will give quite confident answers about how they arrived at their beliefs. It is, however, well-known that a very large part of the cognitive processes by which beliefs are produced is unavailable to introspection.

Indeed, a great deal of studies—some of them mentioned by Kornblith (pp. 21-22)—show that the reasons we offer for our beliefs and decisions do not often correspond to the factors that really influenced them. Reasons, however, do not have to be considered as causes—even if sometimes they might be causes. Independently of how a certain belief was produced, reasons can be understood simply as evidence that supports that belief. This view might not guide us regarding the issue of what beliefs are worth forming—for many times we do not know how beliefs are formed anyway—but it surely tells us something about what beliefs are worth maintaining.

Kornblith (2015, p. 236) addresses this reply and regards it as very implausible. He asks us to consider the following example (p. 237):

> Suppose Jim is part of a faculty search committee, and he is reading over dossiers of applicants. A woman who has applied, with some undeniably strong credentials, is favored by some members of the search committee, but Jim has placed her file in the reject pile. When asked why he found her candidacy unacceptable, Jim cites a number of features of her record. These, he says, are the reasons he believes that she is an unacceptable candidate.

Suppose now that his colleagues point out to Jim that many studies in social psychology show that women candidates are rated lower than men candidates with the same credentials. This seems to imply that the

reasons that are given for the ratings cannot be the *actual* reasons. But, if we dissociate reasons from the causes of our beliefs, as I am proposing here, then Jim could simply say that the causes of his belief are irrelevant and that he cannot be wrong about his actual reasons—they are just the reasons he put forward, by definition. Thus, Kornblith concludes that this view is "extremely implausible" (p. 238).

In my view, that view is not as implausible as it seems at first sight, and Kornblith's example becomes less compelling once some of its elements and assumptions have been spelled out. Jim may maintain that the reasons he offered for the rejection are his actual reasons if he wishes, but that says nothing about whether they are *good* reasons. As a matter of fact, what the evidence of gender bias does is to raise doubts about the quality of those reasons. When reasons for a belief are good, they must—among other things—indicate features of the case that are epistemically relevant *in all similar cases*. Gender, in this case, is not epistemically relevant, so the variation in the kinds and strength of reasons when the candidate is a woman and when the candidate is a man would uncover a problem of *incoherence*. Thus, the proper reaction to those studies in social psychology is not to disregard all reasons against any woman candidate—that would be absurd. The proper reaction is to moderate our trust in the quality of our reasons and double-check them—especially for coherence with past decisions and past reasons.

Consider a last example that may show why it could not be a good idea to identify reasons with psychological causes for beliefs. Personally, I do not believe in the existence of an afterlife. There may be many causes for that belief of mine. But I am pretty sure that an important part of the explanation of why I am convinced that there is no afterlife is that I grew up at the end of the 20th century and went to university at the beginning of the 21st century, in a social environment in which such religious ideas were out of fashion and even discouraged. Obviously, I have what I take to be very good reasons for my belief, and they have nothing to do with that historical explanation. However, if reasons are seen as causes, then my actual reasons would have to include those facts about my background. It is easy to see how such a view could rapidly lead to wholly *ad hominem* argumentation in all theoretical domains. Reasons, then, should not be seen as the causes of our beliefs, and this solves the problem of which Kornblith insightfully made us aware.

5. CONCLUSION

Traditional epistemological theories have conceived of epistemic justification as a state in which epistemic agents find themselves

regarding certain beliefs—what Leite calls the Spectatorial Conception. As a consequence of this, nearly all of those theories ignored the justificatory role of argumentation. Conviction and dissent were simply something external to justification proper. Moreover, whereas some theories—foundationalism and coherentism—took into account the role of reasons, other approaches—such as reliabilism—dispensed with reasons altogether. I have argued that those theories lose sight of the point of our concept of knowledge and force us to conclude, in well-known counterexamples in which nobody would see the protagonists as knowers, that the protagonists are nevertheless somehow justified.

Against those views, I have argued in favour of recent epistemological approaches that are based on considerations about the function of the concept of knowledge and on our public practice of giving and asking for reasons. In particular, I have defended them from Kornblith's insightful and accurate objections against the centrality of reasons. If I am right, such objections can be met provided that reasons are maintained in an interpersonal, argumentative setting and are not identified with the causes of our beliefs.

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