

The prospects of evidentialism

Trent Dougherty (ed.): Evidentialism and its discontents. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2011 xii+336pp, £45.00 HB

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This is a collection of sixteen essays, mostly written by well-established epistemologists, providing insightful criticism and constructive recommendations on Earl Conee and Richard Feldman's epistemology. The essays are organized under the following topics: disagreement; virtue critique; skepticism; knowledge; internalism; evidence; and synthesis with other accounts. Each paper comes with a response from Conee and Feldman. Overall the collection provides a useful, although somewhat jumbled picture of issues facing evidentialism. Whether one is favorable to the position or not, these essays are important reading for any philosopher struggling with epistemic justification.

The collection starts with a very useful historical-conceptual introduction to evidentialism from the editor Trent Dougherty. He draws on the most recent formulations from Conee and Feldman who articulate their position in several ways. The most commonly cited is from their book *Evidentialism*:

EJ: Doxastic attitude D towards proposition p is epistemically justified for S at t if and only if having D toward p fits the evidence S has at the time.

They also have a more recent supervenience formulation of evidentialism from their article 'Evidence' (2008):

SE: Necessarily, if S_1 is justified in believing p , and E is the evidence that S_1 has, then necessarily

- (1) on balance E supports p , and
- (2) if E is the evidence that S_2 has, then S_2 is justified in believing p .

Dougherty highlights troublesome conceptual issues that arise from these formulations; the most important of which revolve around what exactly is meant by

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‘fit’, ‘evidence’, ‘having evidence’, ‘support’, and whether support accrues to propositions or mental states. He also explains important properties of Conee and Feldman’s position: it is an internalist empiricism that takes evidence to consist in mental states. Such evidence provides justification for a belief in virtue of its supporting the propositional content of one’s belief.

Disagreement is the first topic in the collection. The basic idea is that two people may rationally disagree over p , even if they have precisely the same evidence in support of p . Michael Huemer argues that in this situation disagreement may be rational because we hold agent-centered rather than agent-neutral epistemological views. ‘Agent-centered’ means that if S_1 possess reasons or evidence for p , but S_2 merely knows for certain that S_1 has those reasons or evidence and does not possess them herself, then S_1 is better justified than S_2 in believing p . Being agent-neutral means one would judge S_1 and S_2 to be equally justified in this situation. Huemer takes evidentialism to be committed to neutralism, and his argument works best for epistemic intuitions, but Conee and Feldman have the upper hand here in two respects. They argue for neutralism on the plausible grounds that there seems no good reason to think a justifying reason would be stronger support for a belief merely in virtue of undergoing it oneself rather than knowing that it occurred in someone else. Additionally, even if neutralism is wrong, and a centered view is plausible, that may still be compatible with evidentialism—after all if evidence is mental, it seems implausible to think one can ever have as much evidence for someone else’s mental states as for one’s own.

Both Jonathan Kvanvig and Keith Lehrer also argue for the possibility of rational disagreement. Kvanvig thinks Conee and Feldman are committed to mollificationism—the view that simply knowing a peer disagrees implies one ought to move away from one’s own position and towards theirs. Kvanvig argues that mollificationism is self-defeating, and a better picture of disagreement has us rationally ground our beliefs through meta-level ascent and resolution via self-trust. Lehrer has a similar picture of resolving disagreement, but his account of self-trust is more firmly rooted in a coherentist epistemology, and the resolution is less a matter of moving up doxastic levels than of dissolving disagreement by recognizing a paradox. Conee and Feldman respond to both Kvanvig and Lehrer in similar fashion: Why upon recognizing disagreement with a peer is it not more reasonable to suspend judgment than to appeal to self-trust? They have a good point.

Guy Axtell and Jason Baehr argue that evidentialism is inappropriately devoted to a synchronic account of epistemic value, caring only about the evidence S currently possesses for p , whereas a responsible approach would also take into consideration diachronic issues like how S came upon her evidence. Axtell suggests evidentialism is also axiologically parochial, arguing other epistemically relevant concepts like ‘understanding’ are ignored by its commitment to what he calls the ‘rational uniqueness thesis’—that there is only one rational epistemic attitude to take in light of our total evidence. Conee and Feldman rebut both accusations, pointing out that when it comes to epistemic responsibility the truly relevant issue is how evidence justifies belief, and this they believe is in virtue of the ‘fit’ relation—it has nothing to do with our inquiry methods. Nor does evidentialism suffer from a provincial perspective—Conee and Feldman think understanding is an epistemic

state, one where we have explanatory knowledge, so they see no reason to snub ‘understanding’.

John Greco and Richard Fumerton consider the internalist nature of evidentialism. Fumerton’s concern is why we should care about the nature of justification if it is not necessarily connected with truth, as evidentialists suggest. The evidentialist problem is one of accounting for the obvious value of truth, and no plausible means of achieving this is in sight. In response, Conee and Feldman correctly point out that simply failing to connect justification with truth does not undermine motivation for caring about the former—we do after all care about adopting rational doxastic attitudes even if we are confident many of our beliefs are false.

Richard Swinburne argues that evidence is not a mental state but rather a ‘forced inclination to believe’ some proposition: we have rightly basic beliefs and consequently are justified, when subjective probabilities of our inclinations match logical probabilities. This seems implausible, as Conee and Feldman point out, for nothing seems to guarantee these inclinations are not formed on a non-rational basis.

Patrick Rysiew on the other hand sees a Reidian interpretation of evidence as the best way of saving evidentialism from what he sees as the need for a reliabilist component. He suggests prioritizing ‘evidentness’ over evidence, where the neologism denotes a strong connection to truth—only something true can be made evident to one. This maneuver is interesting but needs further clarification, especially since it appears something being evident is made evident by evidence not by evidentness itself. If so, the position seems to appeal precisely to that which it was designed to replace.

Trent Dougherty pushes propositionalism on the evidentialist. The argument is that whether talking about logical, probabilistic, or explanatory evidence, evidence must be constitutively propositional, since in each case, there are good reasons to think only propositions can fill the appropriate relational role. He appeals to Timothy Williamson for these arguments, adding a further methodological argument of his own. While the logical and probabilistic cases may have some merit, the explanatory account fails to be convincing for it seems highly plausible that we explain facts and events not propositions.

Duncan Pritchard argues that evidentialist worries about content externalism should incline us toward an internalist position called disjunctivism. This initially implausible view holds that S_1 and S_2 may have the same mental states but have different levels of justification because their grounds may differ—one perhaps being factive and the other not. If correct, this approach would solve all kinds of troublesome issues in epistemology—the new evil genius problem for one. But it is hard to see how disjunctivism avoids collapsing into an externalist account of mental content.

The last paper in the collection is by Alvin Goldman and is perhaps the most interesting in that we see the long-standing defender of externalist reliabilism appeal to evidentialism to help fill out a complete account of justification. Not surprisingly, this is pitched as an effort to help the evidentialist, but when you compare the obstacles each view faces—reliabilism burdened by the implausible idea that justification can ignore evidence and evidentialism crippled by skeptical scenarios—it is hard not to think of this essay as far more conciliatory than remedial.

Thought-provoking papers by Matthias Steup, Michael Bergmann, Keith DeRose, Timothy Williamson, are also included.

Overall the collection is highly interesting in that we see a diverse group of philosophers genuinely struggling to show how evidentialism fares better or worse in light of not only traditional problems in epistemology but also very recent issues—such as disagreement, the nature of evidence, the tension of an internalist epistemology with externalist mental states, and the intuitive pull of diachronic concerns in light of evidentialism’s synchronic approach. All of these concerns make for a very stimulating set of papers. What we do not get is a clear idea of how evidentialism is going to face up to many of these problems. Conee and Feldman clear a little of the brush in their responses, but evidentialism is still far too underdeveloped to make these paths clear. Perhaps this is not surprising. Dougherty’s motivation to put the collection together was to try and illuminate the future directions for evidentialism. To that end, he succeeded admirably.

References

- Conee, E., and R. Feldman. 2008. Evidence. In *Epistemology: New essays*, ed. Q. Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press.