

CHAPTER SIX

THEORIES OF JUSTIFICATION

6.1 Introductory Discourse

What precisely is involved in knowing a fact? Whatever it is, it is widely recognized that some of our cognitive successes fall short of knowledge. An agent may, for example, conduct himself in a way that is intellectually infallible, and yet still end up believing a false proposition. You have every reason to believe that your birthday is December 1: it says so on your birth certificate and all of your medical records, and everyone in your family insists that it is December 1. Nevertheless, if all of this evidence is the result of a time-keeping mistake made at the time of our birth, your belief about your birthday is false, despite being well justified. Debates concerning the nature of justification can be understood as debates concerning the nature of such non-knowledge-guaranteeing cognitive successes as the one given above.

6.2 Deontological and Non-Deontological Justification

How is the term 'justification' used in ordinary language? Here is an example: I asked you a question (say, how much does our father have in his account), and you told me a lie (say, I don't know – whereas you know). Were you justified in lying? Demola thinks you were, because my question was an inappropriate one, the answer to which was none of my business. What might Demola mean when he thinks that you were justified in responding with a lie? She means that you were under no obligation to refrain from lying. Due to the inappropriateness of my question, it was not your duty to tell the truth. This understanding of justification is commonly labeled deontological justification.

6.3 Deontological Justification

S is justified in doing x if and only if S is not obliged to refrain from doing x. More appropriately:

S is justified in believing that p if and only if S is not obliged to refrain from believing that p.

The key term here is obligation or duty. What kind of obligations are relevant when we wish to ask whether or not a belief (rather than an action) is justified or unjustified? The answer is this: when we evaluate an action, we are interested in assessing the action from either a moral or a prudential point of view, whereas when it comes to beliefs, we are interested in the pursuit of truth, or of understanding, or of knowledge.

Philosophers differ in their response about what we must do in the pursuit of such distinctively epistemic aim. According to one answer, the one favoured by evidentialists, we ought to believe

in accordance with our evidence⁸⁶ For this answer to be helpful, we need an account of what “evidence” consists in, and what it mean to believe in accordance with it. The deontological understanding of the concept of justification is common to the way philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, Moore and Chisholm have thought about justification.

Recently, however, two main objections have been raised against conceiving of justification deontologically. First, it has been argued that deontological justification presupposes that we can have a sufficiently high degree of control over our beliefs. This objection claims that beliefs are akin not to actions but to things. The idea is that beliefs simply arise in or happen to us. Therefore, it is not suitable for deontological evaluation.⁸⁷ To this objection, some advocates of deontological justification have replied that lack of control over our beliefs is no obstacle to thinking of justification as a deontological status.⁸⁸ Other advocates of deontological justification argue that we enjoy no less control over our beliefs than we do over our intentional actions.⁸⁹

The other objection to deontological justification purports that deontological justification cannot suffice for an agent to have a justified belief. This claim is typically supported by describing cases involving either a benighted, culturally isolated society or subjects who are cognitively deficient. Such cases involve subjects whose cognitive limitations make it the case that they are under no obligation to refrain from believing as they do, but whose limitations nevertheless render them incapable of forming justifiable beliefs.⁹⁰

It is evident from the ongoing that those who reject deontological justification think of justification not deontologically, but rather as a property that a belief has when it is, in some sense, sufficiently likely to be true. Alston writes: “I agree that ‘justification’ is the wrong word for a non-deontological concept, but we seem to be stuck with it in contemporary theory of knowledge.”⁹¹ Hence, we may call this sufficient likelihood of justification. Let us define it as follows:

6.4 Sufficient Likelihood of Justification

S is justified in believing that p if and only if S believes that p in a way that makes it sufficiently likely that her belief is true.

If we wish to pin down exactly what the likelihood at issue amounts to, we will have to deal with a variety of issues. Indeed, a belief can be very likely to be true in a way that is completely

⁸⁶ T. Kelly, “The Rationality of Belief and Some Other Propositional Attitudes”, *Philosophical Studies*, 110(2), (2002), 163.

⁸⁷ M. Chrisman, “Ought to Believe”:, *Journal of Philosophy*, 105(7), (2008), 348.

⁸⁸ R. Feldman, “Epistemic Obligations”, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2 (1988), 235.

⁸⁹ M. Steup, “Believing Intentionally”, *Synthese*, 194(8), (2017), 2673; S. Rinard, Susanna,, 2019b, “Equal Treatment for Belief”, *Philosophical Studies*, 176(7) (2019b), 1923–1950.

⁹⁰ For a response to this objection, see M. Steup, “A Defense of Internalism”, in *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, Louis P. Pojman (ed.), (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), pp. 373–384.

⁹¹ W.P. Alston, “Varieties of Privileged Access”, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 8(3), (1989), 7ff.

irrelevant to the beliefs being, or not being, an instance of knowledge. In that case, it would not be sufficiently likely to be true in a way that is relevant to any question of justification. For example, suppose you believe that Buhari will win the election (p). Suppose also that our belief originates solely in wishful thinking. Finally, suppose that Buhari's winning the election is objectively probable because it is a fact that over 80% of the electorates will vote in his favour. It follows that your belief that p is likely to be true. As such, it is very likely that your belief is true. However, since your belief is the result of wishful thinking, it would not be justified nor be an instance of knowledge. What we need is likelihood of truth that arises not by virtue of what the subject believes, but rather by the virtue of the way in which the subject holds, or comes to hold, the belief. But then we must find, in a systematic and principled way, a way of specifying the relevant ways of holding, or coming to hold, a belief. This endeavor raises what has been called the "the generality problem."⁹²

For now, let us just focus on the main point. Those who prefer "sufficient likelihood justification" to deontological justification would say that sufficient likelihood of truth and deontological justification can diverge: it is possible for a belief to be deontologically justified without being sufficiently likely to be true. This is just what cases involving benighted cultures or cognitively deficient subjects are designed to show.

6.5 How is Belief Justified?

What makes a belief that p justified, when it is? Whether a belief is justified or unjustified, there is something that makes it so. Let us call the things that make a belief justified or unjustified J-factors. But which features of a belief are J-factors?

6.5.1 Evidentialism

According to "evidentialists," it is the believer's possession of evidence for p . What is it, though, to possess evidence for p ? Some evidentialists would say it is to be in an experience that presents p as being true. According to this view, if the tea in your cup tastes sweet to you, then you have evidence that the tea is sweet. If you feel a troubling pain in your head, you have evidence that you have a headache. If you have a memory of having a cup of tea for breakfast, then you have evidence about what you had for breakfast. And when you clearly see or intuit that a proposition (say, if Hyginus has more than four cars, then Hyginus has more than three cars) is true, then you have evidence for that proposition.

On this view, evidence consists in perception, introspection, memory and intuition, and to possess evidence is to have such experiences. Therefore, according to this experientialist version of evidentialism, what makes you justified in believing that p is your having an experience that

⁹² See R. Feldman, *Epistemology* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 19.

represents p as being true.⁹³ Other versions of evidentialism might identify other factors as your evidence, but would still insist that those factors are the J-factors.

6.5.2 Reliabilism

Evidentialism is often contrasted with reliabilism, which is the view that a belief is justified if it results from a reliable source, where a source is reliable if it results from already established true beliefs. Reliabilists can also grant that the experiences mentioned in our previous discussion can be important to the justification of beliefs. However, they deny that justification is essentially a matter of having suitable experiences. Instead, they say that those experiences matter to the justification of beliefs not merely by virtue of being evidence in support of those beliefs, but more fundamentally, by virtue of being part of the reliable source of those beliefs.

Different versions of reliabilism have been defended. Some philosophers claim that what justifies a belief is that it is produced by a process that is reliable.⁹⁴ Others claim that what justifies a belief is that it is responsive to grounds that reliably co-vary with the truth of that belief. Still others claim that what justifies a belief is that it is formed by the virtuous exercise of a capacity, and so on. To understand our discussion of evidentialism and reliabilism better, we shall look briefly into internalism and externalism.

6.6 Internal vs. External

6.7 Internalism

Consider a science fiction scenario concerning a human brain that is removed from its skull, kept alive in a vat of nutrient fluid, and electrochemically stimulated to have precisely the same total series of experiences that you have had. Let us call such a brain BIV. A BIV would believe everything that you believe, and would (it is often thought) be justified in believing those things to precisely the same extent that you are justified in believing them. Thus, justification is determined solely by those internal factors that you and your fictitious brain share. This view is what has come to be called *internalism* about justification.⁹⁵

6.7.1 Approaches to Internalism

There is no unanimity on how to understand the notion of internality among those who think that justification is internal, that is, what it is about the factors that you share with your BIV that makes those factors relevant to justification. We can distinguish between two approaches. According to the first, justification is internal because we enjoy a special kind of access to J-factor: they are always recognizable on reflection. Hence, assuming certain further premises (which will be mentioned momentarily), justification itself is always recognizable on

⁹³ R. Feldman, *Epistemology*, 21.

⁹⁴ A. I. Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), ix.

⁹⁵ L. BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*

reflection.⁹⁶ Let us call this approach accessibility internalism. According to the second approach, justification is internal because J-factors are always mental states.⁹⁷ Let us call this mentalist internalism.

6.8 Externalism

On the other hand, externalism is simply the denial of internalism. Externalists say that what we want from justification is the kind of likelihood of truth needed for knowledge, and the internal conditions that you share with your BIV do not generate such likelihood of truth. Hence, justification involves external conditions.

Evidentialism is typically associated with internalism and reliabilism with externalism. Let us see why. Evidentialism says at least two things:⁹⁸

E1: What makes one justified in believing *p* is nothing over and above the evidence that one possesses.

E2: What evidence one possesses is fixed by one's mental states.

By virtue of E2, evidentialism is an instance of mentalist internalism. Whether it is also an instance of accessibility internalism is a more complicated issue. The conjunction of E1 and E2 by itself implies nothing about the accessibility of justification. But mentalist internalists who endorse the first principle below will also be committed to accessibility internalism, and evidentialists who also endorse the second principle below will be committed to the accessibility of justification.

6.8.1 Luminosity: One's own mind is cognitively luminous whenever one:⁹⁹

- is in a particular mental state
- can always recognize on reflection what mental states one is in
- can always recognize on reflection what evidence one possesses.

6.8.2 Necessity: The principle that determines what is evidence for what are *a priori* recognizable. Relying on *a priori* insight, one can therefore always recognize on reflection whether, or the extent, to which a particular body of evidence is evidence for *p*.

Although E1 and E2 by themselves do not imply access internalism, their conjunction with Luminosity and Necessity may imply access internalism.

⁹⁶ R.M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, (3rd ed.), (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 17.

⁹⁷ R. Feldman, 2001b, "Skeptical Problems, Contextualist Solutions", *Philosophical Studies*, 103(1), (2001b), 61.

⁹⁸ M. Steup and E. Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 78.

⁹⁹ Steup and Sosa..... T. Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch.4. He rejects the claim that mental states are luminous.

Now, let us consider why reliabilism is an externalist theory. Reliabilism says that the justification of one's belief is a function of the reliability of one's belief sources such as memorial, perceptual and introspective states and processes. Even if the operations of the sources are mental states, their reliability is not itself a mental state. Therefore, reliabilists reject mentalist internalism. Moreover, insofar as the reliability of one's belief sources is not itself recognizable by means of reflection, how could reflection enable us to recognize when such justification obtains? Reliabilists who think there is no good answer to this question also reject access internalism.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ For works on the internalism-externalism issues, see S.C. Goldberg, "What Is the Subject-Matter of the Theory of Epistemic Justification?", in *Epistemic Evaluation: Purposeful Epistemology*, David K. Henderson and John Greco (eds.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 204–205., among others.