



Arguing against Evidentialism

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Abstract: There exists a widely-shared and strong intuition in favor of satisfying the requirement of producing evidence in support of our beliefs. A person's belief P is appraised as either justified or unjustified, rational or irrational, acceptable or unacceptable depending on whether evidence is presented in support of P . By evidence, we refer to any information presented that is relevant to the truth or falsehood of P . Evidentialism is the theory that requires that for a belief P to be justified, one has to have evidence, good reasons or adequate grounds in support of it. This paper is a philosophical analysis of evidentialism as a theory of justification. The first part consists of presentation of historical origins of the theory as gleaned from the writings of well-known evidentialists, and it will be followed by articulation of its thesis. My main objective is to present arguments that show that: (1) evidentialism itself is self-referentially incoherent; (2) there are beliefs that can be held without violating epistemic duties even though these beliefs are not based upon adequate evidence; and (3) evidentialism has very limited applicability, and there are at least two aspects of human experience where we can hold beliefs that are not based on sufficient evidence without being epistemically irresponsible. If successful, these arguments would give us good reasons for rejecting evidentialism.

Key Words: evidentialism; evidence; basic and nonbasic beliefs; justification

1. INTRODUCTION

Whenever we are trying to decide whether to believe any proposition P , we feel compelled to look for evidence in support of P . There exists a widely-shared and strong intuition in favor of satisfying the requirement of producing evidence in support of P . We feel compelled to provide support for any and all our beliefs because we want our beliefs to be appraised as justified rather than unjustified, or

rational rather than irrational. It seems that a favourable evaluation would follow only if strong evidence is presented in support of said belief.

Evidentialism is the theory that requires us to have evidence, good reasons or adequate grounds in support of any belief P , if we are to be justified in holding P . By "evidence", we refer to any information presented that is relevant to the truth or falsehood of a P . In this paper, we will address the question: Are we really required to accept only beliefs that are



justified by evidence? My objective is to present philosophical arguments for rejecting evidentialism. These arguments will make use of the strategy of allowing evidentialism to destroy itself, through which we will show that once the evidentialist thesis is provisionally accepted and used as a premise in the arguments we put forward, unacceptable or even absurd conclusions obtain.

2. EVIDENTIALISM

Underlying Rene Descartes' (1596-1650) methodological scepticism is the policy of refusing to accept any belief unless he can provide sufficient evidence on its behalf. "Clear and distinct ideas" were needed to overcome doubts concerning beliefs that he accepted on the basis of custom and tradition. He even rejected the reliability of sensory experiences, and restored it only after a thoroughly thought-out rational proof. John Locke (1632-1704) considered evidentialism as a basic principle of any belief system worth taking seriously: "He governs his assent right and places it as he should who, in any case or matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves according as reason directs him" (1961, Vol. 2:280).

The traditional conception of evidentialism became more pronounced in the writings of David Hume (1711 – 1776) and William Clifford (1845 – 1879). "A wise man," writes Hume (1975:110) "proportions his belief to the evidence." Any belief is rational only in proportion to the balance of evidence in its favor. Clifford (1879:180) added a moral dimension in justification of beliefs as manifest in these popular lines:

If belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence the pleasure is a stolen one.... It is sinful because it is stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind.... It is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

In the 20th century, Bertrand Russell (1948:415) reaffirms the need for evidence by emphasizing the requirement of "attaching to every proposition a degree of belief corresponding to its degree of credibility." A century earlier, these words have been attributed to Thomas Huxley (1825-1895): "The deepest sin against the human mind is to believe things without evidence."

These passages ushered in the deep conviction that justified belief depends upon one's having good evidence. A person has to be aware of, or mentally possess, facts that are relevant to determining what one is justified in believing. Mind-independent facts are not considered relevant to determining justification. If a person is aware that the facts he is in possession of are not sufficient to support a particular belief, then he is, per evidentialist requirement, not justified in holding this belief.

As a theory of epistemic justification, the thesis of evidentialism may be stated as:

Person S is justified in believing proposition P at time *t* if and only if S has evidence for P at *t* that supports believing P.

This thesis emphasizes that for anybody to have reasonable or justified belief about any proposition P, he has to have adequate evidence or reasons for thinking that P is true. At first glance, there seems nothing objectionable, to say the least, to the requirement of providing justification or support for any belief held. This is not exclusive to philosophy. Thinkers from various periods in history have constructed arguments to justify belief in God. Trial judges determine whether a crime has been committed and determine the guilt of the perpetrator beyond reasonable doubt on the basis of exhibit or testimony that constitutes criminal evidence. A medical apparatus can be used to determine whether there's really a bullet in the head of someone whose memory has been impaired.



Proportioning assent to evidence seems to reflect our deep intuition that we ought to be able to back up our knowledge claims with evidence. A more careful analysis, however, shows that there are good reasons for its rejection.

3. AGAINST EVIDENTIALISM

The untenability of the evidentialist theory can be shown by shedding light on three lines of argumentation. In all three, the strategy of attack is to allow the theory to destroy itself.

First, evidentialism is self-referentially incoherent. In our efforts to comply with the evidentialist requirement of providing support for our beliefs, we cannot help but notice that the principle of evidentialism per se also stands in need of evidence. How do we know whether evidentialism is true? On what grounds do we affirm the truth of the theory? Do we have adequate evidence for saying that only beliefs supported by evidence can be rationally accepted? Surprisingly, we find no other beliefs from which we can derive adequate justification for evidentialism. As philosophers of old say, it is self-refuting or even self-contradicting. Using contemporary parlance, we say, it defeats itself, or it is self-referentially incoherent.

Second, there are beliefs that can be held without violating epistemic duties even though these beliefs are not based upon adequate evidence, namely basic beliefs. If a belief is supported by evidence, there must be other beliefs from which we derive the belief in question. Beliefs of this sort are derived beliefs or nonbasic beliefs. These nonbasic beliefs are derived from facts that we are mentally in possession of. Evidentialism, in a good way, promotes the idea of accepting beliefs derived from other beliefs that we know to be adequate enough to support our inferred beliefs. There is, however, another kind of beliefs that we accept without support from still other beliefs, namely, basic beliefs. These are beliefs that are reasonable and proper to accept without having other beliefs as evidence. It is reasonable to hold the

belief that I am hearing music being played without venturing into the arduous task of processing relevant information before me just in order to find out whether there is indeed a complex configuration of sound waves and frequencies that together constitute music that is audible to me, and whether I am in fact hearing it.

Basic beliefs are generally characterized as either self-evident or incorrigible. Since “ $2+5=7$ ” is seen to be true by anyone who understands basic arithmetic, then it is self-evident. Incorrigible beliefs, on the other hand, are those that deal with one’s own, immediate experience. “I hear music” and “I feel pain” are examples of this sort of beliefs. What is important to emphasize at this point is that we are not being irrational when we hold self-evident and incorrigible beliefs which are, of course, not based on evidence.

Third, evidentialism has very limited applicability. Here we have two cases where strict adherence to the evidentialist demand of providing evidence for every belief won’t work.

In recent years, the question concerning rationality of religious belief has dominated the field of philosophy of religion. Rather than search for evidence for God’s existence, Reformed Epistemologists like Alvin Plantinga (1932-), Nicholas Wolterstorff (1932-), and William Alston (1921-) have argued that theistic faith can be warranted on the basis of its proper basicity. The religious experience of the St. Teresa of Avila (1512-1582), for instance, of seeing Jesus standing near her, cannot be dismissed on the basis of lack of evidence. Its rationality can be affirmed inasmuch as her belief that her experience is about a divine presence is a properly basic one. Theists can maintain belief in God without violating epistemic duties.

The case of friendship is equally interesting. William James (1842-1910) claims that one’s belief may justifiably run ahead of one’s evidence. He argues that there are times when preliminary faith is



needed for affirming a belief in question, and as such is antecedent to its evidence. There is a kind of faith that creates the facts of friendship. While not based on evidence, this faith is a requisite, lawful and indispensable for friendship (James 1897:25). This is how he builds his case:

Whether you do or not like me depends... on whether I meet you half-way, am willing to assume you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you have done something apt... ten to one your liking never comes. The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that truth's existence (23-24).

Here we find a person who has to act in a particular way in order to make friendship happen. Such efforts to befriend the other rests upon the question: "Do you like me or not?" Stated in a slightly different manner: "Is it true or false that you (person B) like me (person A)?" If A believes that P (B likes A), A has reason to believe that he (A) will have to act in a way that will produce the truth of "B likes A." The belief is why A acts the way he does. If A withholds belief, the situation renders friendship with B highly improbable, because such states of disbelief yields unfriendly actions – "Ten to one, the liking will never come." The evidentialist may have to accept this truth the hard, and perhaps painful, way,

We have presented here only two cases that show the limited range of applicability of evidentialism. In sum, evidentialism cannot account for religious beliefs that are properly basic, just as it cannot rule out requisite preliminary faith in the case of friendship.

3. CONCLUSION

For all its merits, evidentialism cannot be considered as *the* viable philosophical theory of justification for reaching justified true beliefs. While an evidentialist may be excellent at avoiding errors, (if you don't believe anything until there is a mountain of evidence for it, you won't be wrong very often.) he won't be believing much at all (since there will be many things for which you just don't have enough evidence to lead you one way or another). Evidentialism demands so much but proves too little.

While various disciplines are strongly inclined towards requiring that strong evidence be produced in support of any claim, philosophical analysis shows that we find no sufficient reason for establishing why the requirement itself *must* be followed. If someone would dare ask: "What's your evidence?" bear in mind a quick retort: "Why do I need evidence?"

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Presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2014
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
March 6-8, 2014

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