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Criticisms of Evidentialism:

A critique of Jonathan Way's solutions to the issues of Evidentialism

The epistemological position of Evidentialism was introduced by Feldman and Conne (1985), attempting to better demonstrate the formation of belief and its justification. In Feldman and Conee's paper, "Evidentialism", they defend the evidentialist position by introducing the following argument that would entail evidentialist epistemic justification:

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

I will make this argument more digestible, but beforehand, I would like to define what it is to be a doxastic attitude: A doxastic attitude means a position, standpoint, or belief. A doxastic attitude is to have either belief, disbelief, or suspension of belief. Broken down, the argument for EJ is that the observer (S) will be confronted with a proposition or an occurrence (p). Naturally, the observer (S) may form a doxastic attitude (D) towards the proposition/occurrence (p). Evidentialism states that the doxastic attitude (D) toward the proposition (p) is epistemically justified as knowledge, if and only if, the evidence "fits" the situation.

For instance, if an observer were to form a belief that the sun is out today, and she has clear evidence that the sun is out by her sunburn, her need for sunscreen, or the literal sun in the sky that she observes-- she is epistemically justified for her belief and therefore is an instance of knowledge. Another example could be an observer who does not see the sun out today, and she has evidence that the sun is not out-- the darkness, the cold weather, her goosebumps, and the need for a sweater-- she is equally epistemically justified not to believe.

The basic argument form of this example looks like the following:

1. If an observer forms a doxastic belief and the evidence fits her belief, then her belief is justified.
2. The observer forms a doxastic belief and the evidence fits her belief.
3. Therefore, her belief is justified.

Contextually, to be an Evidentialist involves an epistemic stance, underscoring the paramount importance of evidence in belief formation and justification. Feldman and Conne (1985) state that "advocating for beliefs to be proportionate to available evidence, evidentialists emphasize reasoned justifications and epistemic responsibility." A common interpretation of how evidentialism may strike a reader would be a philosophical stance that heavily entails empiricism.

All that has been discussed so far is foundational to understanding the evolution that analytical epistemologists have progressed given Feldman and Conee's initial proposition. I would like to clarify that from this point, moving forward in this paper, I will no longer use the definition that I have used for evidentialism by Feldman and Conee (1985) due to my shift toward Jonathan Way's (2016) definition for the rest of this paper. Additionally, any language such as doxastic attitude will no longer be used in the content of the remainder of this paper until page 8, where I propose a brief rebuttal from Way to my criticisms. To re-emphasize, the

necessary instantiation of Feldman and Conee’s definitions functioned as a foundational background to further show how Evidentialism has evolved, as well as to serve as a juxtapositional device for the remainder of this paper. Feldman and Conee’s definitions are even more necessary because of how the following professor introduces Evidentialism. I will introduce philosopher Jonathan Way’s paper, “Two Arguments for Evidentialism”, to further illustrate his argument and eventually plunge into the evaluation portion of this paper.

Way’s Definitions and Concerns

Way begins his argument by introducing, what I believe to be, a more understandable, although slightly diluted, argument of what Evidentialism is. According to Way, “Evidentialism is the thesis that all reasons to believe *p* are evidence for *p*. Evidentialism implies that *incentives* for believing *p* are not, thereby, reasons to believe *p*” (Way, 2016).

Way familiarizes us with his most recent explanation of Evidentialism which uses this new term called, “incentives”. (Note: The introduction of incentives is crucially important to the rest of his argument as well as my objections to his argument later on in the objection portion of this paper). Incentives are reasons to do something, or if misinterpreted, a reason for a belief. The example Way provides us to undermine evidentialism is one involving the existence of God. He says that “the fact that believing in God would make you happy is not, thereby, a reason to believe that God exists”¹, (Way, 2016). The traditional understanding of Evidentialism, as presented by Feldman and Conee, suggests that if the evidence “fits” your claim, then it is sound to thereby affirm that your claim is epistemically justified. Way realizes that this can be extremely damaging to Evidentialism because a person can use feelings as evidence and be epistemically justified under the prior definition of Evidentialism. Way’s observation of the definition of Evidentialism sets up the stage to criticize using feelings as evidence and later develop his solution. After asserting his observation and concern, Way introduces the “argument from reasoning”, a solution to the issue observed attributed to philosopher Nishi Shah in his paper, “A New Argument for Evidentialism”, (2006). Shah’s goal was to eradicate this philosophical conundrum by introducing the “argument from reasoning” which states that reasons for belief should be considerations that we can use in the process of reasoning to arrive at a belief. The argument Way provides is as follows, (Way, 2016):

1. Reasons to believe *p* must be considerations from which you could reason to believe *p*
2. No one can reason from incentives for believing *p* to believing *p*
3. So, incentives for believing *p* are not reasons for anyone to believe *p*

The first premise is saying that there must be a logical reasoning process prior to having a reason to believe something. The second premise uses Way’s definition of incentives, and further states that no one can reach the end of reasoning if we use incentives as a pedestal to reach belief. So, according to Way, incentives are not reasons for our belief in something.

Way’s next section of his paper focuses on criticizing Shah’s proposed argument, the “argument from reasoning”, the attempt to solve the issue within Evidentialism.

¹ This argument is exceedingly relevant and will be restated and explained more in section 3

Destroying the “Argument From Reasoning”

In the second section of his paper “Preliminaries”, Way introduces the reasoning constraint or “RC” to understand Shah’s “argument from reasoning”, premise 1. RC is the following principle: For something to be a valid reason for believing in something else (let's call it ϕ), you should be able to reason from another belief (let's call it "p") to the belief in ϕ . So, if p is a reason to believe, you should be able to use p in your thinking to support the belief in ϕ . Way gives us these terms only to emphasize and evaluate how pragmatic considerations align with RC and most importantly, how it aligns with the “argument from reasoning”.

The third section of Way’s objection comes in the bulk of his argument against the “argument from reasoning”. Way states that the fullest and most explicit version of the “argument from reasoning” is attributed to Nishi Shah, (2006) and follows with his criticisms of Shah’s contribution to epistemology. The objection Way provides begins with the claim that there is a failure in the “argument from reasoning”, more specifically, the second premise: we cannot reason from incentives to belief but rather, according to Way, we *can*. Way states that “this claim is either false because it ignores the possibility of reasoning badly from incentives, or does not combine with RC so as to support evidentialism”. To illustrate this, Way provides us with this example:

“Carl believes that if God exists, then believing in God will make him happy. He also believes that believing in God will make him happy. And he is capable of affirming the consequent. So, Carl is capable of reasoning from the belief that believing in God will make him happy to believe in God”.

As shown, people like Carl affirm the consequent and this case would suggest that Carl’s belief in God is supported through evidentialism. It is a case where an individual believes that holding a belief will make them experience the “incentive” or emotion inevitably. So, if that emotion correlates with what “fits” their evidence, then it must be the case that the individual is epistemically justified and is correct. A harmful example that might be used to overamplify the dangers of this model of justification could be Hitler the Evidentialist, (not to be confused with the historical Hitler). Hitler believes that if genocide is permissible, then committing genocide will make him happy. He also believes that believing that genocide is permissible will make him happy. So, Hitler is capable of reasoning from the belief that believing that genocide is permissible will make him happy to now consequently believe that genocide is truly permissible. What a pernicious mouthful.

Way believes incentives are devastating for evidentialism and offers potential solutions such as a reformed premise 2, or a constant judgment of our premises to support our conclusions but concludes that any reform to the “argument of reason” is insufficient and other methods are unnecessary.

The Solution: Argument from Good Reasoning

Given the previous foundations and definitions, Way gives us what he calls the “argument from good reasoning”, a promising revision of the original. Way argues that the first step to revise the original “argument from reasoning” would be to revise RC to become RC*. RC* entails that there is now an emphasis that reasons must be considered from where one could reason well. What emerges from RC* is the Good Reasoning Constraint, GRC, which states that

reasons to believe must be premises of good reasoning. The implication the GRC has is that reasoning from incentives to belief is not good reasoning. In other words, the GRC directly addresses incentives and disqualifies their relevance and value in the reasoning process. The argument from good reasoning:

- 1'. Reasons to believe p must be premises of good reasoning to believing p.
- 2'. It is not good reasoning to reason from an incentive for believing p to believing p.
- 3'. So, incentives for believing p are not reasons to believe p.

Way's defense of premise 1 starts with how he believes that reasons are meant to guide us and that good reasoning is the pathway from reasons to responses. More directly, "reasons are what should guide us, and so there must be a good route from our reasons to the responses they support. Reasons must be premises of good reasoning" (Way, 2016). GRC functions as an equal exchange of evidence where reasons to believe in things are contingent on good reasoning to do them, and that good reasoning in this framework is objective. Way then replies to the second premise that concerns being against reasoning from pragmatic reasons. Way argues that reasoning from incentives to belief might be beneficial but not epistemically substantial because it often involves faulty logic, lacks evidential support, violates epistemic norms, and tends to prioritize pragmatic goals over the pursuit of truth and knowledge. Way argues that the term "good" in "good reasoning" is viewed attributively, meaning depending on the context, as well as that the idea aligns with the Link principle, a principle that connects good reasoning to good arguments. Way's term "good", is further supported by the expressibility of reasoning, which entails one's nature of reasoning towards a question, the following connections between correct belief and reasoning, and the idea that reason can be assessed by examining its expression.

Objections and Philosophical Evaluation

I agree with Way's affirmation, which asserts that reasoning from incentives to belief lacks epistemic merit. In my view, Way successfully seems to have underscored the problem of affirming the consequent fallacy in forms of reasoning. I find his reasoning compelling and that his overall argument in what I call, "destroying the 'argument from reasoning'" is sound. The most convincing string of arguments that Way proposes would be that of incentives. The insinuation that incentives are a major problem strengthens Way's argument against Shah and creates, what I think, is the strongest part of his objection. The overarching claim here is that by prioritizing incentives without a solid evidential foundation, individuals risk subverting the epistemic integrity of their beliefs. In recognizing the value of Way's objections, it's crucial to acknowledge the groundwork he lays for his new proposition. The meticulous effort in establishing a foundational path not only strengthens his objection but also enriches our understanding of the intricate dynamics involved. Overall, I find Way's analysis to be a valuable contribution to discussions within epistemology, shedding light on the complexities involved in navigating the relationships between practical motivations and epistemic justification. I will not argue that Way's efforts to create a foundational path to better prepare us for his new proposition were not effective on their own if kept solely as an objection. As emphasized before, Way's objections are well-developed but are more geared toward tearing down the argument that Shah proposes on the "argument from reasoning" as mentioned before. The reason I included Feldman and Conee's definitions was to include substantial context for readers due to Way's lack of

context in his paper. Way jumped in immediately and provided an argument form that could be read as a dilution of Evidentialism.

There are shortcomings in his revision of the “argument from reasoning”. Portions of his arguments entail an overbearing amount of objectivity (such as, what truly *is* a “good” reason for believing in something). These entailments seem to require a solid foundational grounding that does not appear to have been explained most effectively or managed with the correct tools, (such as the *Link* principle, also known as *Link*). For instance, Way's emphasis on the *Link* principle is noteworthy, but a more comprehensive exploration of the subjectivity inherent in determining the epistemic value of reasons could add depth to his analysis, (more on this later).

My first objection is to Way's concerns challenging the assumption that reasons must *always* guide us through good reasoning. More precisely, I object to the proposed GRC. Here is my proposed counterargument:

Let us suppose that there is a person whom we will call Rory. Rory is going out to buy some groceries and uses his car to get around. Rory is exceedingly protective of his car because it is a family heirloom that his late father gave him. Over the years, he has become extremely possessive of his car and fears irrationally that he has left his car unlocked. Rory possesses a belief (B) that he left his car unlocked. Rory's possession of this belief is only due to an irrational or illogical reason (I), a fear. He has no “good reasoning” to believe what he believes in because it is founded on illogical grounds. According to Way's GRC, irrational reasons should not qualify as “good reasoning” because they are not “good reasons”. Consequently, due to the GRC, Rory's belief would be immediately dismissed by Way. However, it turns out that Rory was right about this particular instance; Rory's car is truly unlocked, an instance of “bad reasons” but true belief. Rory was right even if his process of achieving reasoning was hindered by a “bad reason” such as irrationality.

I would imagine that Way would object to my objection by saying that even if a “bad reason” produces a true belief (or a true belief comes from “bad reasons”), it would be a true belief although, not an epistemically justified belief. Way would claim that epistemic justification would not be given because of the question of whether Rory truly knew that his car was unlocked. This runs similar to the Barn Country example²; does the observer know that the barn they are pointing to is the only real barn? I believe that truly knowing whether the car is locked or unlocked is relevant. There would be a disconnect if we claim that Rory truly knew his car was unlocked and then we followed that he had a good reason to believe so. If his reason to believe that his car was unlocked was on perverted grounds, then can we call this an instance of knowledge? I believe that Way would want there to be a smooth connection between epistemic justification and a good reason to believe X. An alternate route that Way may take is adopting the doxastic attitude of suspension of belief, neither believing nor not believing. The evidence was hindered due to Rory's irrational fear so this may lead to a case of the suspension of belief. The final route that Way might go is to say that Evidentialism, as proposed by Feldman and Conee, assumes a *ceteris paribus*³ subject, who has evidence that “fits” their belief. Rory's irrational fear is not evidence of his belief, but rather a reason to believe, so therefore, an incentive or motivation with the added layer of irrationality. Even if Rory is right, his evidence does not fit

² The Barn Country example by Edmund Gettier, also called a Gettier case, is described as a landmark philosophical problem where someone has a true belief that seems justified, but it turns out not to be real knowledge due to unexpected factors. Gettier cases challenge the traditional idea that knowledge is just justified true belief.

³ *Ceteris Paribus*: Assuming all else equal.

his belief, so it is not epistemically justified⁴ which is ultimately insufficient for a clean epistemological line of reason.

My second and final challenge directly addresses the Link principle (*Link*) that Way uses. (From this point forward I will use *Link* as shorthand). The first point of contention with *Link* lies in its relevance to situations in which individuals form beliefs based on incentives, although the theoretical framework is not epistemically sound, Evidentialists argue that beliefs should be supported by evidence. Additionally, *Link* seems to emphasize positive thinking over the quality of incentives. After all, *Link* connects good arguments with good reasoning. Where implementation motives or external factors play an important role in the formation of trust, the direct relationship between positive evaluation and positive evaluation proposed by *Link* may not reflect internal complexity the right way. *Link* might as well be wishful thinking and therefore, not as useful or relevant.

A critical examination of reflection, as *Link* emphasizes, reveals potential limitations in how it relates to information in which individuals form beliefs through flawed inferences based on stimuli. As stated before, *Link* argues that reasoning expresses issues in an argument, and good reasoning corresponds to a good argument. However, when individuals are influenced by motivational or behavioral theories (such as incentives or emotion), the reasoning leading to their beliefs does not fit neatly into epistemological reasoning. The nature of pragmatic reasoning, often influenced by other subjective factors, challenges the rigid expressiveness criteria set by *Link*, which once again undermines its objective usefulness. Reconsidering the validity of the relationship in terms of beliefs formed for practical reasons or reasons raises questions about its universal applicability. While *Link* emphasizes the standard dimension of positive thinking, it fails to adequately account for the diversity of knowledge on which beliefs can be formed based on different motives. Let me give an example to illustrate my claim. Let us consider a scenario where Rory is contemplating a career change (he is no longer irrational). Rory works a stable job as a valet attendant at a beautiful hotel with great benefits. Even so, Rory has a passion for music and dreams of producing a hit song in Nashville. Now, according to *Link*, good reasoning should lead to a good argument. To have good reasoning, it may involve a careful analysis of Rory's musical skills, the demand for music producers in the market, and possibly the fulfillment he achieves with this job. Now here is where the issue of *Link* begins; motives for Rory's dreams are not so neatly kept into *Link's* consideration of "good" reasoning. Maybe Rory's decisions are influenced by a sense of purpose, a motive that does not fit *Link's* context of epistemic justification. *Link* depends on positive thinking, logical coherence, and evidence, so it becomes difficult to apply this tool when complex motives appear on the table with a mix of emotions and subjective values.

Furthermore, *Link's* insistence on associating positive reasoning with positive arguments demonstrates the need for inherent objectivity. Asserting objectivity is exceedingly difficult because as mentioned before, there are complex motives behind belief. So, in other words, the most damaging difficulties arise when considering the subjective and relative nature of beliefs formed under motivational influence. What qualifies as a good argument can vary depending on individual perspectives, cultural context, and practical considerations. (This may lead to a form of contextualism which is further harmful). Attempts to establish universal standards of quality through *Link* may oversimplify everything, hindering *Link's* effectiveness.

Way may be able to object to my argument by saying that overall, the situations that I include would not affect *Link's* effectiveness because positive reasoning still entails positive

⁴ Where epistemic justification is crucial and works coherently with Evidentialism.

arguments. He might resort to a model that is only specific to the most generally accepted model of *Link* as it is presented, and negate it by saying that negative reasoning entails negative arguments; otherwise, he will suspend belief for any other mix of entailment. I imagine Way to be skeptical of my argument because *Link* still holds up well with specific examples. However, I believe it to be pernicious to be constrained to only specific examples, making *Link* not as generally or easily applicable outside of his subset.

In conclusion, Way's arguments for Evidentialism were presented as first, an objection to Shah's argument for the "argument from reasoning", and second, as a proposition to update the argument by specifying it with "good" reason which turned out to be successful in the objection sense, and somewhat successful in the argument update. Way's arguments were strong and well-supported at times, though he lacked contextual substance when concerning the assumption that reasons must always guide us through good reasoning and the specificities of *Link*. Regardless of its flaws, Way's ambitious model reform by inputting the updated RC* and GRC was successful, holding all things constant but could also use further exploration and the addressing of my concerns with regard to his fundamental principles.⁵

⁵ Considering that the model only applies to the scenarios he presented.

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