

# Unit 3: The Analysis of Justification



## PART 1: EVIDENTIALISM

# Recap



- In the last unit, we investigated the nature of knowledge.
- In particular, we asked:
  - What is knowledge?

# Recap



- What is knowledge?
- JTB Analysis
- No False Grounds Analysis
- The Causal Analysis
- Truth-Tracking Analysis
- Is some superior analysis of knowledge possible? Or is knowledge unanalyzable?

# Points from Discussion Groups



- A number of discussion groups raised some intriguing suggestions for what a better analysis of knowledge might look like.

# Points from Discussion Groups



- **One suggestion:** Knowledge = justified true belief that is not true as a matter of luck.

# Points from Discussion Groups



- **One suggestion:** Knowledge = justified true belief that is not true as a matter of luck.
- *Question:* what does it mean a belief to be true as a matter of luck?
- **One possibility:** A belief is true as a matter of luck only if there is a sufficiently similar world where the person holds the same belief on the same basis, but that belief is false.

# Points from Discussion Groups



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- *Question:* Is it possible to have knowledge even when conditions are abnormal?

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- *Question:* Is it possible to have knowledge even when conditions are abnormal?

# Switching Gears



- In this unit we'll be switching gears and investigating the nature of *justification*.
- We'll be asking:
- What is justification? What is the difference between a justified belief and an unjustified belief?

## Why this question is important...



- 1) Many traditional analyses of knowledge seek to explain knowledge – at least in part – in terms of justification. If these analyses are correct, then in order to fully understand knowledge, we will need to have some understanding of justification.

## Why this question is important...



- 2) We saw in the last unit that it is quite difficult – perhaps impossible? – to solve the Gettier problem. This has led at least some philosophers to question whether knowledge is really all that important. According to these philosophers, the really important questions in epistemology is not whether someone *knows* something, but whether they are *justified* in believing it.

## Why this question is important...



- 2) We saw in the last unit that it is quite difficult – perhaps impossible? – to solve the Gettier problem. This has led at least some philosophers to question whether knowledge is really all that important. According to these philosophers, the really important questions in epistemology is not whether someone *knows* something, but whether they are *justified* in believing it.

## Why this question is important...



- 3) As we saw in Unit 1, some versions of the skeptic's argument challenge our *justification* for believing ordinary claims about the external world. So if we want to respond to this version of skepticism, it might be helpful to have a better grip on what justification involves.

## Why this question is important...



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# Preview



- This week we'll look in detail at one approach to justification: *evidentialism*.
- The key idea behind evidentialism is that justification depends on *evidence*: your belief is justified provided it is supported by your evidence.

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- Next week we'll look at a rival approach: *reliabilism*.
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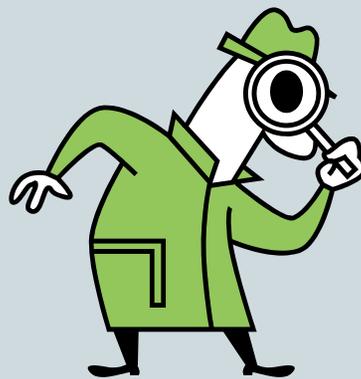
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- What is justification? What is the difference between a justified belief and an unjustified belief?
- One way of approaching this question is to consider two people, one of them justified in their belief, the other unjustified in their belief. We can then ask ourselves: “What is the best explanation for this difference? Why is the one person’s belief justified whereas the other person’s belief is unjustified?”



- **A Tale of Two Detectives.** Two detectives are investigating a murder. Detective Careful closely examines all of the evidence. Taken together, the evidence indicates that the butler is the most likely suspect: the butler's fingerprints and DNA were found on the murder weapon, the butler has a flimsy alibi, and the butler was spotted fleeing the scene of the crime. Consequently, Detective Careful believes the proposition: *The butler committed the crime (p)*.





- **A Tale of Two Detectives (Continued).**  
Detective Careless also believes  $p$  (*The butler committed the crime*). But Detective Careless has not reviewed the evidence carefully: Careless hasn't looked at the fingerprint or DNA reports, and Careless hasn't talked to potential witnesses. Rather, Detective Careless believes the butler is guilty because Careless dislikes butlers.



- **A Tale of Two Detectives (Continued).** Detective Careless also believes  $p$  (*The butler committed the crime*). But Detective Careless has not reviewed the evidence carefully: Careless hasn't looked at the fingerprint or DNA reports, and Careless hasn't talked to potential witnesses. Rather, Detective Careless believes the butler is guilty because Careless dislikes butlers.
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- **The Evidentialist Answer:** Detective Careful's belief is justified because it is supported by the evidence. Detective Careless' belief is unjustified because it isn't supported by the evidence.

# Evidentialism Introduced



- More generally, evidentialists offer the following theory of justification:
- **Evidentialism:**  $S$ 's belief that  $p$  is justified at time  $t$  iff  $S$ 's evidence at  $t$  supports believing  $p$ .

# Evidentialism Clarified



- **Evidentialism:** S's belief that  $p$  is justified at time  $t$  iff S's evidence at  $t$  supports believing  $p$ .
- *Clarifications:*
  - a) Possessed vs. unpossessed evidence

# Possessed vs. Unpossessed Evidence



The tree rings provide evidence of the tree's age, regardless of whether anyone *possesses* this evidence.



# Evidentialism Clarified



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- *Clarifications:*
  - a) Evidentialism should be understood as claiming that what you are justified in believing depends on the evidence that you *possess* at a time.
    - *Note:* this raises a difficult and important question as to what it means to *possess* some evidence.

# Evidentialism Clarified



- **Evidentialism:** S's belief that  $p$  is justified at time  $t$  iff S's evidence at  $t$  supports believing  $p$ .
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  - b) Total vs. partial evidence

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- **Evidentialism:** S's belief that  $p$  is justified at time  $t$  iff S's evidence at  $t$  supports believing  $p$ .
- *Clarifications:*
  - b) Total vs. partial evidence: evidentialism should be understood as claiming that what you are justified in believing depends on the **total** evidence that you possess at a time.

# Evidentialism Clarified



- **Evidentialism:** S's belief that  $p$  is justified at time  $t$  iff S's evidence at  $t$  **supports** believing  $p$ .
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- c) What does it mean for some evidence to **support** a belief?

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- c) What does it mean for some evidence to **support** a belief?
- **One answer:** Evidence  $e$  supports believing  $p$  iff  $e$  makes  $p$  sufficiently likely to be true.

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- c) What does it mean for some evidence to **support** a belief?
- **One answer:** Evidence  $e$  supports believing  $p$  iff  $e$  makes  $p$  sufficiently likely to be true.
- A bit more precisely:  $\Pr(p|e) > t$ , where  $t$  is some threshold. (Tricky  $q$ : what is the threshold? .9? .99?)

# Evidentialism Clarified



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# Evidentialism



- **Evidentialism:** S's belief that  $p$  is justified at time  $t$  iff S's evidence at  $t$  supports believing  $p$ .
- *Advantages:*
- Explains intuitions about pairs of cases (e.g., Detective Careful vs. Detective Careless)
- Explains why evidence seems to matter to epistemology

# Evidentialism



- **Evidentialism:** S's belief that  $p$  is justified at time  $t$  iff S's evidence at  $t$  supports believing  $p$ .
- *But – surprise! - the view is not without objections...*



# **OBJECTIONS TO EVIDENTIALISM**

# Practical Reasons for Belief?



- One major debate concerns whether there can be justified beliefs that are not supported by the evidence.

# Practical Reasons for Belief?



- **The Optimist.** You are running in a competitive race. At the beginning of the race, you have no evidence that you will win, or even place particularly well. However, you are nonetheless very confident that you will win. Moreover, this confidence helps improve your performance – as a matter of fact, you run faster because of this belief.



# Practical Reasons for Belief?



- **The Optimist.** You are running in a competitive race. At the beginning of the race, you have no evidence that you will win, or even place particularly well. However, you are nonetheless very confident that you will win. Moreover, this confidence helps improve your performance – as a matter of fact, you run faster because of this belief.
- Some philosophers have claimed that even though your belief (that you will win) is not supported by the evidence, it is nonetheless justified, because it is practically beneficial.

## Another example



- In a similar vein, some philosophers have argued that even if there is no evidence that supports religious beliefs, we can have practical reasons for religious beliefs that justify them.

## Another example



- A famous version of this argument is due to Blaise Pascal (1623-1662).
- Pascal assumes that if God exists, then someone who believes in God will gain infinite rewards, and someone who doesn't believe in God will get infinite suffering. By contrast, if God doesn't exist, believing in God will cause at most finite suffering:

	God exists	God doesn't exist
Belief	$+\infty$ (infinite gain)	- 1 (finite loss)
Disbelief	$-\infty$ (infinite loss)	+1 (finite gain)

## Another example



	God exists	God doesn't exist
Belief	$+\infty$ (infinite gain)	- 1 (finite loss)
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- So, Pascal argued, even if our evidence does not support believing that God exists, we can still be justified in believing God exists based on the expected payoffs.

# A Possible Reply



- Distinguish between epistemic justification and pragmatic justification.
- Evidentialism is a theory of *epistemic* justification. This leaves open the possibility that there is another sort of justification – pragmatic justification – that is determined by non-evidential factors.

# A Possible Reply



- Distinguish between epistemic justification and pragmatic justification.
- Evidentialism is a theory of *epistemic* justification. This leaves open the possibility that there is another sort of justification – pragmatic justification – that is determined by non-evidential factors.
- **Q:** Do you find this response convincing? Are there other ways of defending evidentialism from the practical reasons objection?

# Forgotten Evidence



- Another challenge for the evidentialist comes from cases of *forgotten evidence*.

# Forgotten Evidence



Here are some things that it seems like I am justified in believing:

- Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice*.
- Mt. Everest is the tallest mountain in the world.
- Some trees live over 3,000 years.

# Forgotten Evidence



Here are some things that it seems like I am justified in believing:

- Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice*.
- Mt. Everest is the tallest mountain in the world.
- Some trees live over 3,000 years.

What's my evidence for these propositions? If pressed, it would be hard for me to say.

# Forgotten Evidence



So there seem to be propositions that we believe long after we forgot the original evidence that we were given in their favor. But nonetheless it seems we are justified in believing these propositions.

# Forgotten Evidence



That is, it seems that I am currently justified in believing e.g., Mt Everest is the tallest mountain in the world, even though I've forgotten the evidence in favor of it.



# Forgotten Evidence



But this is inconsistent with evidentialism, which says that a belief is only justified at **time  $t$**  if it is supported by evidence that the agent possesses **at  $t$** .

## Discussion Questions



- We've covered two objections to evidentialism: the objection from practical reasons, and the objection from forgotten evidence. Do you find either of these objections convincing? If so, is there any way of modifying evidentialism that avoids the objection(s)?