

Varieties of Evidentialism¹

Thomas Kelly
Princeton University

In contemporary epistemology, a number of different ideas travel under the banner of “evidentialism.” In this paper, I distinguish and offer some critical reflections on three of these ideas: (1) evidentialism as an account of *epistemic justification*; (2) evidentialism as *anti-pragmatism*; and (3) evidentialism as ‘*evidence-first*’ epistemology.

1. Evidentialism as an account of epistemic justification

On one prominent usage, “evidentialism” refers to a view about epistemic justification. The basic idea is that what a person is epistemically justified in believing is *determined by* their evidence. For example, if I’m epistemically justified in believing that Princeton is in New Jersey, this is *because* my evidence supports the claim that Princeton is in New Jersey. This is the evidentialism of Conee and Feldman (1985, 2004). Its rivals are alternative accounts of epistemic justification, a paradigm of which is reliabilism in the tradition of Goldman (1979).

Conee and Feldman open their flagship 1985 paper by endorsing the core evidentialist thought:

We advocate evidentialism in epistemology. What we call evidentialism is the view that the epistemic justification of a belief is determined by the quality of the believer’s evidence for the belief (1985/2004:83).

They then endorse the following principle, which they offer as a more precise statement of the view:

¹ Thanks to Kieran Britt, Sebastian Liu, Scott Stapleford, and Mike Veber for comments. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference on “Evidentialism at 40” at St. Thomas University. I’m grateful to the conference participants for their feedback, to Scott Stapleford and Kevin McCain for organizing the event and inviting me to participate in it, and (last but not least) to Rich and Earl, for their stimulating work in epistemology and for their friendship over the years.

(EJ) Doxastic attitude D toward proposition p is epistemically justified for S at t if and only if having D toward p fits the evidence S has at t (198/2004:83).

However, contrary to the suggestion that (EJ) is a more precise statement of the intended view, it seems clear on reflection that (EJ) is *too weak* to capture the basic evidentialist idea. Notably, (EJ) is a biconditional; as such, it has purely extensional truth conditions. It will be true so long as there are no cases in which epistemic justification and evidence come apart. For familiar reasons, no principle with purely extensional truth conditions will do justice to the basic evidentialist thought that what a person is epistemically justified in believing is *determined by* their evidence. Similarly, no principle with purely extensional truth conditions will do justice to the more specific evidentialist thought that

If I'm epistemically justified in believing that the Princeton is in New Jersey, this is *because* my evidence supports the claim that Princeton is in New Jersey

for the content of such 'because' claims go beyond anything with purely extensional truth conditions.

In later work, Conee and Feldman seem to recognize that something stronger than (EJ) is needed in order to adequately capture the content of the intended view. Notably, in their 2004 collection *Evidentialism*, they suggest that their view is best understood in terms of *supervenience*.² In the opening paragraph of the introduction to that collection, they repeat the core evidentialist idea, which is once again informally glossed in terms of a relation of determination, and then introduce the supervenience idea:

As we understand it, evidentialism is a view about the conditions under which a person is epistemically justified in having some doxastic attitude toward a proposition. It holds that this sort of fact is *determined entirely* by the person's evidence. In its fundamental form, then, evidentialism is a supervenience thesis according to which facts about whether or not a person is justified in believing a proposition supervene on facts describing the evidence that the person has (2004:1; emphasis added).

Similarly, in the "Afterword" to the reprinted version of the original paper "Evidentialism," they say

² McCain (2014), a book-length development and defense of Conee and Feldman-style evidentialism, also understands the view in terms of supervenience.

Our bedrock epistemic view is a supervenience thesis. Justification strongly supervenes on evidence (2004:101).

They then endorse the following principle:

(ES) The epistemic justification of anyone's doxastic attitude toward any proposition at any time strongly supervenes on the evidence that the person has at the time (2004:101).

I think that in some respects, the move from (EJ) to (ES) is an improvement. Nevertheless, I also think that (ES) ultimately suffers from the same fundamental problem as (EJ): even if it states a truth about the relationship between epistemic justification and evidence, it is too weak to capture the core evidentialist thought that what a person is epistemically justified in believing is *determined by* their evidence. More generally, I think that trying to capture the core evidentialist thought in terms of supervenience is unpromising, for the same reason.

Before explaining why I think that this is so, let me offer a more constructive suggestion. I suggest that the core evidentialist thought is best captured, not in terms of supervenience, but rather in terms of *grounding*.

Consider claims of the form: "S is justified in believing p *because* S's evidence supports p." The 'because' here is obviously not the 'because' of causal explanation. Rather, it is the 'because' of metaphysical or philosophical explanation. For the evidentialist, when a person is justified in believing some claim, this is *in virtue of* facts about the person's evidence. But grounding is exactly that relation which is picked out by the 'in virtue of' idiom, or the relevant sense of 'because.'

My suggestion then, is that Conee and Feldman-style evidentialists should avail themselves of the progress that has been recently made in understanding the notion of grounding and endorse something along the following lines as the canonical statement of their view:

(EG) Necessarily, for any person, facts about which doxastic attitudes are epistemically justified for that person are entirely grounded in (i.e., obtain in virtue of) facts about their evidence.³

³ As the main text suggests, I offer this not as a serious candidate for being the definitive statement of evidentialism but one that improves upon prior formulations and gestures in the direction of a

Why should we understand evidentialism as a grounding thesis as opposed to a supervenience thesis? As it's standardly explicated, supervenience is a matter of necessary covariation between properties or sets of facts.⁴ A supervenience thesis like (ES) will be true so long as throughout modal space facts about what evidence people have and facts about what they are justified in believing covary in the right ways. The problem is that even if facts about what people are justified in believing and facts about their evidence modally covary in the right ways, this still falls short of the core thought that facts about what people are justified in believing are what they are *because* of facts about their evidence. This point corresponds to a more general lesson of recent metaphysics: that relations of supervenience are too weak to capture grounding relations.⁵

I've suggested that Conee and Feldman-style evidentialism is best understood as a grounding thesis in the neighborhood of (EG). I have not endorsed (EG) or any similar principle as a true claim about the relationship between epistemic justification and evidence. Notice, however, that if (EG) or some similar principle is true, then the original

more adequate proposal. No doubt, further refinements and improvements are possible. I leave those for some up-and-coming Rochester graduate student.

In my judgment, the best of the recent explosion of work on grounding amounts to genuine progress in metaphysics. See especially Rosen (2010) for a sophisticated (and to my mind, compelling) defense of the idea that the notion of grounding is by now sufficiently well-understood so as to be a respectable item in our analytic toolkit, one that is particularly useful for formulating philosophical theses.

At the conference at which this paper was delivered, it was pointed out to me that Bob Beddor (2015) has also suggested that Conee and Feldman-style evidentialism is naturally formulated as a grounding thesis. Beddor proceeds to argue that, so formulated, evidentialism is open to a kind of circularity objection. Here I want to strongly endorse Beddor's idea that evidentialism is naturally formulated as a grounding thesis without endorsing the objection. Beddor also notes, correctly in my view, that many of the informal locutions that Rich and Earl employ to explain evidentialism are strongly redolent of grounding ideology, notwithstanding the official formulations that they offer (2015:1849-1850).

⁴ For a good survey, see McLaughlin and Bennet (2023).

⁵ As Berker (2018a) notes, the relatively widespread recognition of this point within contemporary metaphysics owes much to seminal 21st century work on grounding by Kit Fine, Gideon Rosen, and Jonathan Schaffer. However, as Berker also emphasizes, the point had been argued as far back as the 1980s by a number of other philosophers, including Jonathan Dancy and Mike DePaul. See Berker (2018a), especially §3, "Grounding: the very idea," for an excellent discussion and further references.

biconditional (EJ) will be a true claim about the relationship between evidence and epistemic justification, albeit one that is too weak to capture the core evidentialist thought. Similarly, if (EG) or some similar principle is true, the supervenience thesis (ES) will be a true principle about the relationship between evidence and epistemic justification, albeit one that is also too weak to capture the core evidentialist thought.

If in fact I'm right in thinking that (EJ) and (ES) are too weak to do justice to the core evidentialist thought, then we would expect to find the following: possible epistemological theories on which (EJ) and (ES) turn out to be true, but that are *not* happily classified as evidentialist, because they do not respect the core evidentialist thought that a person's evidence determines what they are justified in believing.

In fact, this is exactly what we find. Although a merely possible example would suffice to make the point, an interesting actual example is provided by Timothy Williamson's current epistemological views. According to Williamson (forthcoming), you are epistemically justified in believing that *p* if and only you know that *p*.⁶ He also thinks that if you know that *p*, *p* is part of your total evidence, and that if *p* is part of your total evidence, then your total evidence conclusively supports *p*, since the probability of *p* on any body of propositions that includes *p* is 1 (Williamson 2000). Moreover, he also thinks that all of this holds of necessity. It follows that for Williamson, one's evidence and what one is justified in believing can never come apart. Any case in which a person is justified in believing *p* is a case in which their evidence decisively (indeed, conclusively) supports *p*, since any case in which they justifiably believe *p* must be a case in they know *p*, and any case in which they know that *p* is guaranteed to be a case in which they have conclusive evidence that *p* is true, viz. *p* itself. Therefore, any case in which a person justifiably believes *p* is a case in which their evidence supports *p*. More generally, for the Williamsonian, facts about what a person is epistemically justified in believing and facts about their evidence will reliably covary in the right ways throughout modal space.

⁶ Williamson's basic idea is that your belief is justified if and only if it complies with the norm that governs belief, and the norm that governs belief is knowledge. Conee and Feldman reject the idea that a belief is epistemically justified only if it is known. I do so as well. (See Kelly forthcoming for a discussion of Williamson's views.) But whether Williamson's view is correct or even plausible is irrelevant for current argumentative purposes.

Therefore, the Williamsonian will accept the supervenience thesis (ES) as stating a true claim about the relationship between epistemic justification and evidence.

Nevertheless, it would badly misunderstand Williamson's epistemological picture to classify it as an evidentialist view. For in many cases in which one justifiably believes that p , one's only evidence that p is true might be *p itself*, a fact that one knows in some way other than by believing it on the basis of evidence that indicates that it is true. In any such case, the fact that one is justified in believing p is not *because* one has evidence that p is true, as the evidentialist would have it. For the Williamsonian, that gets the order of explanation backwards in such cases: the reason that one has evidence that p is true is because one justifiably believes/knows that it is true. If one takes acceptance of the supervenience thesis (ES) as definitive of evidentialism, one will end up incorrectly classifying Williamson's view as an evidentialist view, notwithstanding the fact that it fails to respect the basic evidentialist thought about what determines what.

In contrast, when we understand evidentialism as a thesis about grounding, this allows us to classify the theories correctly. Conee and Feldman's view gets classified as an evidentialist view while the Williamsonian⁷ view described here does not. This further suggests that we should formulate evidentialism about epistemic justification as a thesis about grounding, as opposed to a thesis about supervenience.

Before moving on, let me say something about how what's been said so far relates to another recurrent idea in Conee and Feldman's work on evidentialism: the idea that there is something *obvious* about the view. In the original 1985 paper, they write:

EJ is not intended to be surprising or innovative. We take it to be the view about the nature of epistemic justification with the most initial plausibility (1985/2004:84).

⁷ As one would expect, the fact that Williamson's view is not happily classified as an evidentialist view (notwithstanding the fact that it entails both (ES) and (EJ)) depends on various fine points of Williamson exegesis. Although I think that the interpretation that I offer is correct, whether it is or not is ultimately beside the point. As noted above, what ultimately matters is that there are certain possible epistemological positions that entail (ES) and (EJ) but that do not respect the core evidentialist thought about determination. I claim that the theory described above is such a theory. That is, it is enough if *the view that I attribute to Williamson* is a view of the relevant kind, even in the event that it is not actually his view.

And in the Introduction to the later collection, they offer the following retrospective remarks:

...the two of us saw evidentialism as sufficiently obvious to be in little need of defense. When we noticed to our amazement that prominent contemporary epistemologists were defending theories that seemed incompatible with evidentialism, this prompted us to write our first paper explicitly on this topic, "Evidentialism." We have been defending it ever since. We remain mildly amazed (2004:1).⁸

I too once thought that there is something obvious about evidentialism. I now think that, at least in my case, that thought was based on a confusion. As I now see it, the feeling that there is something obvious about evidentialism makes most sense if one is still thinking in terms of the relatively weak, biconditional claim (EJ), or something similar, but the feeling is unwarranted once we bear in mind that what is (or should be) at issue is actually a much stronger thesis about grounding, along the lines suggested by (EG).

As emphasized above, the extensional claim (EJ) will be true so long as there are no cases in which a believer's evidence and what they are epistemically justified in believing come apart. In testing (EJ), one naturally looks for counterexamples in which a believer's evidence supports some claim that they are not epistemically justified in believing, or (conversely) cases in which they are epistemically justified in believing something that is not supported by their evidence. As a potential counterexample to (EJ), my current belief that $1+1=2$ seems to be an exceedingly poor candidate: surely I'm justified in believing this trivial truth, and whatever evidence I have that bears on its truth speaks in its favor. Since my belief is both epistemically justified and favored by my evidence, my belief that $1+1=2$ is no threat to (EJ).

In contrast, I think that my belief that $1+1=2$ is a potential threat to (EG). For even though I'm epistemically justified in holding this belief, and my evidence favors it, it is not obvious that the correct epistemological story about why I'm epistemically justified in believing that $1+1=2$ is because I have evidence that it's true. Indeed, far from being obvious, that epistemological story does not seem like the most natural view. Rather, an at least equally natural view is that I'm justified in believing that it's true because I can simply

⁸ Compare McCain (2014:2).

recognize that it is, in a way that does not depend on my having evidence that speaks in its favor. I will return to this contrast in §3 below. For now, I simply want to make the modest point that even if the weaker principle (EJ) is obvious, that doesn't mean that the stronger grounding thesis is; but it is in terms of the latter that evidentialism should be understood.

2. Evidentialism as Anti-Pragmatism

For better or worse, the name "evidentialism" is also used for a different cluster of views in contemporary epistemology. In this sense of "evidentialism," the evidentialist is an *anti-pragmatist*. Here the paradigmatic opponent isn't a philosopher like Goldman, who offers an alternative theory of epistemically justified belief. Rather, the paradigmatic opponent is the pragmatist William James, and his many contemporary intellectual descendants, who hold that practical or moral considerations (as opposed to evidence or purely intellectual considerations) can make a difference to what we have most reason to believe, or what we're in a position to know, and the like.

In fact, the term 'evidentialism' has been used to refer to a number of different anti-pragmatist theses. Here I'll mention three.

First, in the ethics of belief literature, 'evidentialism' has sometimes been used to refer to the position taken by W.K. Clifford in "The Ethics of Belief" (1879), the paper from which the contemporary literature gets its name and which was immortalized as the primary target of William James' pragmatist critique in "The Will to Believe." There, Clifford argues for the following principle:

Clifford's Principle: It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything, upon insufficient evidence (p.77).

Second, proponents of pragmatic encroachment hold that practical considerations (e.g., the potential costs of being wrong) can make a difference to whether a believer is in a position to know or justifiably believe a given proposition. In this context, those who deny that the practical encroaches on the epistemic in this way are sometimes called

‘evidentialists.’ In this sense of ‘evidentialist,’ the evidentialist is someone who endorses the following thesis:

No Pragmatic Encroachment: Practical considerations do not make a difference to what a person is in a position to know or justifiably believe.⁹

Third, in the literature on reasons for belief, evidentialism is often used to refer to the following anti-pragmatist thesis:

No Practical Reasons for Belief: Strictly speaking, there are no practical reasons for belief.¹⁰

By my lights, these anti-pragmatist theses differ significantly in their credibility. Consider, for example, Clifford’s Principle. Reading the “Ethics of Belief,” it’s clear that Clifford’s view is that it’s always *morally wrong* to believe on the basis of insufficient evidence. His primary example is that of a shipowner who for narrowly self-interested reasons convinces himself that his ship is seaworthy even though the evidence doesn’t support this, a belief that places the lives of many innocent passengers at risk. As a potential example of immoral believing on the basis of inadequate evidence, this is about as good as it gets. However, such favorable examples seem woefully inadequate to justify a sweeping, exceptionless generalization like Clifford’s Principle. Suppose that on a given occasion I form the belief that my favorite football team will win its next game, even though my evidence doesn’t support that belief. Am I thereby guilty of moral wrongdoing? Of course, if my belief leads me to gamble away all of our family’s money, leaving my kids

⁹ For this usage of ‘evidentialism,’ see, for example Ganson (2008), who writes: “Evidentialism is the view that facts about whether or not an agent is justified in having a particular belief are entirely determined by facts about the agent’s evidence; the agent’s practical needs and interests are irrelevant” (p.441).

¹⁰ The use of the name ‘evidentialism’ for this view is particularly widespread, both among proponents and critics. See, e.g., Dandeleit (2021), Flowerree (2020), McCormick (2015), Reisner (2008, 2009), Rinard (2015, 2017), Shah (2006, 2011), Singh (2021), Way (2016), and Worsnip (2021), among others. Berker (2018b:429), a proponent of the view, argues that the name is inapt in multiple ways and suggests the name ‘anti-pragmatism,’ as a replacement; Kelly and Cohen (2024) follow his lead.

destitute, the case looks stronger. (This in effect transforms the case into another version of Clifford's shipowner example.) But I'm no gambler, and I simply watch the game from my couch, with nothing significant at stake. What is the case for immorality, given that understanding of the example?

Clifford contends that even in cases involving beliefs about apparently trivial matters, or in which the believer never acts on the belief, believing in the absence of evidence nevertheless constitutes "a great wrong towards Man" (p.76). His idea seems to be that whenever one believes in the absence of evidence, one makes oneself credulous, and one's being credulous will have pernicious downstream consequences. So the idea that there any cases of "harmless" believing in the absence of evidence turns out to be an illusion. However, this line of thought depends on an extremely strong empirical assumption about human psychology, to the effect that whenever one believes in the absence of evidence (even in contexts in which nothing is at stake) one thereby alters one's standing dispositions, in such a way that one is more likely to believe in the absence of evidence more generally, including in high-stakes situations. I see no reason to accept that assumption.¹¹

Thus, I think that we should reject Clifford's Principle, which seems to me to be implausible on its face, susceptible to counterexamples, and supported only by weak arguments. On the other hand, I think, and argue elsewhere (Kelly and Cohen 2024, Kelly forthcoming), that we should accept the anti-pragmatist view that there are no practical reasons for belief.

What is the relationship between evidentialism in Feldman and Conee's sense and evidentialism in the sense of anti-pragmatism?

Conee and Feldman often stress that their evidentialism is a view about *epistemic* justification as opposed to justification in some more all things considered sense. When evidentialism is construed in this way, the evidentialist isn't committed to taking a stance one way or the other on many of the issues that divide pragmatists and anti-pragmatists. For example, the evidentialist about epistemic justification is free to either deny or endorse Clifford's Principle, since their view is silent about the morality of believing in the absence

¹¹ For development of positive doubts to the contrary, see Kelly (2000:60–64).

of evidence.¹² Similarly, because their view is silent about knowledge, they are free to either endorse or deny the thesis that practical considerations can make a difference to whether a believer is in a position to know.¹³ And they are likewise free to either endorse or deny the existence of practical reasons for belief.

Indeed, in principle, the Conee and Feldman-style evidentialist is free to endorse even very robust forms of pragmatism, according to which practical considerations *always* trump the evidence, in any case in which practical considerations and evidential considerations pull in different directions. For their view holds that facts about epistemic justification are entirely determined by facts about evidence, but leaves entirely open what role facts about epistemic justification play in determining which beliefs one should hold all things considered. On the other hand, the view is similarly consistent with robust forms of anti-pragmatism, for the same reason.

The fact that Conee and Feldman-style evidentialism is not committed to contentious issues being resolved in one way rather than another might seem to be an attractive feature of the view. However, I worry that inasmuch as that feature depends on emphasizing that the view is account of epistemic justification, as opposed to justification in some more all things considered sense, it depends on an assumption that it is itself highly questionable. This is the assumption that there are different senses or species of justification that apply to beliefs, of which epistemic justification is one among others.¹⁴

Let me close this section by trying to give some idea of why one might be skeptical of this assumption.

¹² Apropos of Clifford's Principle, Conee and Feldman write: "The evidentialism we defend makes no judgment about the morality of belief" (2004:2).

¹³ One might think that the Conee and Feldman-style evidentialist is at least committed to denying pragmatic encroachment on epistemically justified belief, since the idea that facts about epistemic justification supervene on facts about evidence seems to leave no room for practical considerations to make a difference. This is the assumption made by Fantl and McGrath in their seminal (2022) paper. However, against this, Feldman and Conee (2004:103-104) suggest that their version of evidentialism is in fact compatible with pragmatic encroachment in Fantl and McGrath's sense.

¹⁴ For skepticism about this assumption, see e.g. Mills (1998), Kelly (2002), Cohen (2016, 2018), Rinard (2018:128), and Kelly and Cohen (2024).

Right now Ernie¹⁵ knows that he's in Canada. His belief that he's in Canada is, I assume, a rational belief. Of course, a philosopher who thinks that there are multiple species of rationality or justification that apply to beliefs might insist that, strictly speaking, we should distinguish between the epistemic rationality of Ernie's belief and its practical rationality. (Perhaps in this case, his belief is both, and this licenses us in calling it 'rational' without any qualification.)

I assume that, on any plausible version of the multiple species view, both what it's epistemically rational for someone to believe and what it's practically rational for them to believe can change over time. Suppose that a crazed gunman bursts through the door and credibly threatens to shoot anyone who believes that they're in Canada. (The gunman has some reliable way of detecting what people believe, so fooling him is out of the question.) When that happens, the expected utility of Ernie's belief plummets. Practically speaking, he would be much better off without the belief, and this is something that Ernie himself might recognize.

But suppose that even once the gunman has credibly threatened us, Ernie still thinks that he's in Canada. I assume that this is a realistic assumption about the case: given everything Ernie knows, his being threatened in this way would not be enough to get him to stop holding the belief that he's held up until now, that he's in Canada.

What should we say about the rationality of Ernie's belief that he's in Canada, in these circumstances? A proponent of the multiple species might say: "Well, that depends on whether you're talking about its epistemic rationality or about its practical rationality. If you're talking about epistemic rationality, then Ernie's belief is still epistemically rational, since his epistemic situation hasn't changed in any significant way. But the belief is now practically irrational, since it's likely to lead to his demise, and Ernie knows this."

Against this, I deny that there is any legitimate sense of 'rational' in which Ernie's belief that he's in Canada is irrational in the envisaged circumstances, given that he knows that he's in Canada. Even after he's threatened, it's still rational for him to think that he's in Canada. Indeed, in the envisaged circumstances, this seems to be part of Ernie's problem: he's a rational person, and the rational thing for him to think is that he's in Canada.

¹⁵ Ernest Sosa, who was in the audience when this paper was presented in Fredericton, Canada.

Perhaps if he has a bag of Derek Parfit's irrationality pills (Parfit 1984) nearby, it would be practically rational for him to start taking the pills, in an attempt to make himself temporarily irrational, and to lose the rational belief that's going to get him killed.

Of course, it's agreed on all sides that we can *evaluate* Ernie's belief practically. In the envisaged circumstances, it's a practically bad belief for him to hold. But it doesn't follow from this that there is some legitimate sense of 'rational' or 'justified' in which it's an irrational or unjustified belief. After all, any state of the world can be evaluated practically; a fortiori, any state that a person might be in can be evaluated practically. For example, right now I weigh 195 pounds. If my doctor is to be believed, that's a bad state for me to be in. (Or at least, I would be better off I were at least ten pounds lighter.) It doesn't follow from this that *my weighing 195 pounds* is itself practically irrational. To the extent that we can make good sense (and it can be true) to say that I'm irrational for weighing 195 pounds, or that that my weighing 195 pounds is an irrational state for me to be in, what we seem to mean is this: it was irrational for me not to exercise more, or to eat better, things that might have led to my not being in this state.

Similarly, if in the case described above, there is some action or actions that Ernie can perform to get rid of his belief that he's in Canada, then it might be practically rational for him to do those things, and his failing to do those things would be practically irrational. But at this point we've shifted to talking about the rationality of acting in one way rather than another, as opposed to the rationality of believing in one way rather than another. And as Conee and Feldman have emphasized to good effect in responding to various criticisms of evidentialism over the years, we should distinguish sharply between questions about what one is justified in believing and questions about which actions one is justified in performing.

Needless to say, these brief remarks don't settle any issues; they are meant to be suggestive rather than dispositive. There are many things that a proponent of the multiple species view might say in response. Although I'm skeptical that there are multiple species of rationality that apply to beliefs, my present point is a much more modest one: the claim that there *are* multiple species of rationality that apply to beliefs is itself a very substantive thesis, and so any view that leans on this idea is giving considerable hostage to fortune of

its own. And it doesn't help if one puts the point in terms of 'justification' as opposed to 'rationality.'¹⁶

3. Evidentialism as Evidence-First Epistemology

There is, I think, another view in epistemology that's naturally suggested by the name "evidentialism" and that at least some philosophers have sometimes had in mind. This view places the notion of evidence at the very center of epistemology and then attempts to understand other central notions of epistemology such as knowledge and justified belief with reference to it. Call this view *evidence-first epistemology*. Rivals to evidentialism in this sense include Williamson's "knowledge-first" program in epistemology, Richard Pettigrew's "accuracy-first" program, Ernest Sosa's virtue-theoretic approach to epistemology, and so on.

A philosopher who endorses evidence-first epistemology will think that we should understand the other central notions of epistemology in terms of evidence plus other notions that strictly speaking are not epistemological concepts. For example, they will think that the correct way to think of (epistemically) justified belief is in terms of evidence plus the psychological notion of belief. Similarly, they will think that the best way to understand knowledge is in terms of evidence, plus the psychological notion of belief, the semantic/metaphysical notion of truth, and so on.

¹⁶ Indeed, I think that at least the Conee and Feldman-style evidentialist should hold that there is no significant distinction between epistemic rationality and epistemic justification. Perhaps there is room for the *reliabilist* to insist that there is room for a principled and well-motivated distinction between epistemic justification (understood in terms of reliability) and epistemic rationality (understood in terms of responsiveness to reasons for belief, and the like). But the evidentialist should not allow that there is a distinction between epistemic justification (understood in terms of evidence) and epistemic rationality, which is to be understood in different terms. Presumably, there is a close connection between epistemic rationality and epistemic reasons for belief: credible testimony that *p* is true is an epistemic reason to believe that *p* is true, which tends to make it epistemically rational for one to believe that *p* is true. But credible testimony that *p* is true is evidence that *p* is true, which according to the Conee and Feldman-style evidentialist, tends to make it the case that one is epistemically justified in believing that *p* is true. The Conee and Feldman-style evidentialist should think that there is one thing here, epistemic rationality/justification, which involves responding to epistemic reasons/evidence, as opposed to two things that for some reason run in parallel.

As I understand it, a philosopher who accepts evidence-first epistemology is not committed to thinking that notions like *knowledge* or *justified belief* can be reductively analyzed in terms of evidence plus other notions. But they will think that, when a person is epistemically justified in believing *p*, the correct answer to the question “Why are they justified in believing *p*?” will make reference to the person’s evidence as opposed to something else. Similarly, in any case in which a person knows that *p* is true, the correct answer to the question, “How do they know that?” will make reference to their evidence. Relatedly, the proponent of evidence-first epistemology will maintain that facts about what people know and justifiably believe are always at least *partially grounded* in facts about their evidence. As that suggests, a proponent of evidence-first epistemology will reject the Williamsonian idea that the notion of evidence can itself be analyzed in terms of the allegedly more fundamental notion of propositional knowledge.

What are the prospects for evidence-first epistemology? As someone who sees evidence as at least *one* of the central concepts for epistemology, I’m intrigued by the project of seeing how far things might be pushed in this direction. But my current stance is one of skepticism. Let me conclude this section and the paper by offering some relevant considerations, and then suggesting an alternative view.

I currently believe that Earl Conee began teaching at Rochester in 1982. I believe this because Earl told me, with apparent sincerity, and I have no significant evidence that suggests otherwise. Suppose that my belief is rational, and something that I know. If someone were to ask *how* I know that Earl began teaching at Rochester in 1982, or what explains why I’m justified in believing this, I take it that the correct answer to these questions would advert to the fact that—as the evidentialist would have it—I have compelling evidence that I received from Earl. As I understand the position, the proponent of evidence-first epistemology thinks that it’s not simply that some or many cases of knowledge and rational belief are best understood in terms of this paradigm, but that *all* cases of knowledge and rational belief should be assimilated to this paradigm.

This is an extremely ambitious and controversial claim. Is perceptual knowledge best understood as knowledge on the basis of evidence? Consider a well-known passage from Austin (1962):

The situation in which I would properly be said to have *evidence* for the statement that some animal is a pig is that, for example, in which the beast itself is not actually on view, but I can see plenty of pig-like marks on the ground outside its retreat. If I find a few buckets of pig-food, that's a bit more evidence, and the noises and the smell may provide better evidence still. But if the animal then emerges and stands there plainly in view, there is no longer any question of collecting evidence; its coming into view doesn't provide me with more evidence that it's a pig, I can now just *see* that it is, the question is settled. And of course, I might, in different circumstances, have just seen this in the first place, and not had to bother with collecting evidence at all (p.115).

I take it that Austin would object to the idea that paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge (as when one sees that some animal is a pig) should be assimilated to knowledge on the basis of evidence (as when one knows that some animal is a pig on the basis of the kind of inductive evidence that he describes). I also take it that this issue about perception is still very much with us. Suppose that the infallible oracle informs us that Austin had it all wrong: direct realism about perception is hopeless, even in its most sophisticated 21st century forms. Rather, the true story about perception and perceptual knowledge involves a kind of indirect or representative realism. For example, perhaps the true story is this: what we really have to go on in perception are our perceptual experiences, and paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge involve a kind of successful inference to the best explanation. If this is in fact the true story, then I take it that that's great news for the evidentialist, because it means that perceptual knowledge really is a special case of knowing on the basis of evidence.

Still, even in that case, the evidentialist isn't home free, for there are other challenges. Consider, for example, one's knowledge that $1+1=2$. Even if we assume that the probability of this proposition on one's current evidence is 1 (as on standard pictures) or very close to 1, does one know it *because* one has evidence that speaks in its favor? At least on the face of it, one's knowledge that $1+1=2$ seems to differ from one's knowledge that Earl began teaching at Rochester in 1982 in this respect. Rather, the natural view is that one can simply recognize that $1+1=2$ is true in the absence of evidence, unlike the proposition that Earl has been teaching at Rochester since 1982, which is a proposition that one would not be in a position to know in the absence of evidence for its truth. (It's no accident that much of the tradition claims that propositions like $1+1=2$ are *self-evident*, i.e., evident even in the absence of supporting evidence that suggests that they are true.)

As I understand it, the evidentialist is committed to thinking that, initial appearances to the contrary, the correct epistemological story about one's knowledge that $1+1=2$ really does assimilate it to knowledge on the basis of compelling evidence.¹⁷ Although I'm in principle open to being persuaded of this, here I will simply record my current skepticism that this will turn out to be true.

Indeed, the view that I'm currently inclined to favor is a kind of pluralism. According to that view, *many* cases of knowledge and justified belief really are cases in which the basic evidentialist picture is right. Paradigms include cases in which one arrives at knowledge or justified belief on the basis of an inference to the best explanation of one's evidence, or on the basis of testimony. On the other hand, there are other cases, like our knowledge that $1+1=2$, or our own immediate introspective knowledge of our own mental states, or (perhaps) our perceptual knowledge of our immediate environment, in which the attempt to understand what is going on in terms of responsiveness to evidence distorts the phenomena. In any case, how much of our knowledge and justified belief is ultimately best understood along broadly evidentialist lines is, I think, among the fundamental questions that epistemologists should continue thinking about.

¹⁷ Of course, there are different stories that one might tell about this. Quineans will hold that one's knowledge that $1+1=2$ is another case of knowledge on the basis of compelling empirical evidence. Others will hold that the evidence consists of "intellectual seemings" or "intellectual appearances."

REFERENCES

- Austin, J.L. (1962). *Sense and Sensibilia*. (OUP).
- Beddor, Bob (2015). Evidentialism, circularity, and grounding. *Philosophical Studies* 172 (7):1847–1868.
- Berker, Selim (2018a). “The Unity of Grounding.” *Mind* 127 (507):729–777.
- Berker, Selim (2018b). “A Combinatorial Argument Against Practical Reasons for Belief.” *Analytic Philosophy* 59(4):427–470.
- Clifford, W.K. (1879). “The Ethics of Belief.” Reprinted in *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Prometheus 1999).
- Conee, Earl & Feldman, Richard (2004). *Evidentialism* (OUP).
- Fantl, Jeremy & McGrath, Matthew (2002). “Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification.” *Philosophical Review* 111(1):67–94.
- Feldman, Richard & Conee, Earl (1985). “Evidentialism.” *Philosophical Studies* 48(1):15–34.
- Ganson, Dorit (2008). Evidentialism and Pragmatic Constraints on Outright Belief.” *Philosophical Studies* 139(3):441–458.
- Kelly, Thomas (2000). “Epistemic Rationality and the Ethics of Belief.” Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University.
- Kelly, Thomas and Cohen, Stewart (2024). “There Are No Practical Reasons for Belief.” In Roeber et al (eds.) *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, 3rd edition. (Wiley–Blackwell):81–93.
- Kelly, Thomas (forthcoming). “The New Evil Demon Problem and the Nature of Evidence.” In *Knowledge and Rationality: Essays in Honor of Stewart Cohen*, edited by Comesana and McGrath.
- McCain, Kevin (2014). *Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification* (Routledge).
- McLaughlin, Brian and Karen Bennett, "Supervenience" (2023). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/supervenience/>>.
- Parfit, Derek (1984). *Reasons and Persons* (OUP).
- Rosen, Gideon (2010). “Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction.” In Hale & Hoffmann (eds.), *Modality* (OUP):109–135.

Williamson, Timothy (2000). *Knowledge and Its Limits* (OUP).

Williamson, Timothy (forthcoming). "Justifications, excuses, and skeptical scenarios," in J. Dutant and F. Dorsch (eds.), *The New Evil Demon* (OUP).