

# Anti-(Mental) Statism

Alexander Arnold  
University of Notre Dame  
aarnold1@nd.edu  
Draft—comments welcome

June 11, 2009

One principal contestant in the debate over the ontology of epistemic reasons is *Statism*, or — what is a more apt name — *Mental Statism*.<sup>1</sup> There is a simple argument against Mental Statism. I state it in what follows.

Mental Statism entails the following claim:

**(M):** For all  $e$ ,  $e$  is an epistemic reason only if for some  $S$ ,  $e$  is one of  $S$ 's mental states.

Here is a plausible principle linking epistemic reasons to evidence:

**(LP):** For all  $e$ ,  $e$  is an epistemic reason iff  $e$  is a bit of evidence.

Together, (M) and (LP) entail (E):

**(E):** For all  $e$ ,  $e$  is a bit of evidence only if for some  $S$ ,  $e$  is one of  $S$ 's mental states.

I will argue that (E) has counterintuitive consequences.

Consider the following two questions:

**(Q1)** What is the epistemic significance of evidence one doesn't possess?

**(Q2)** What is the epistemic significance of evidence one ought to have, but doesn't have?

---

<sup>1</sup>Among the defenders of Mental Statism are Swain (1981, chap. 3), Alston (1988), Conee and Feldman (2004, 2008) and, more recently, Turri (ming).

There are philosophers who think that these questions are sensible and important for epistemology. Gilbert Harman has argued that evidence one does not possess can undermine one's knowledge (1973; 1980). Hilary Kornblith (1983), John Gibbons (2006) and Jason Baehr (2009) have argued that the evidence one ought to have, but doesn't have, plays an important role in determining the justification of some of one's beliefs. This fact lends strong support to the following proposition (P):

**(P):** (Q1) and (Q2) are sensible questions only if there is evidence that exists independently of any cognizer.

Quite obviously, (E) and (P) are incompatible. (P) seems quite plausible, which means we ought to reject (E). If we reject (E), then we must reject at least one of (LP) or (M). But rejecting (LP) would require us to accept that at least one of the following propositions is true: "There are epistemic reasons that aren't evidence" or "There is evidence that doesn't consist in epistemic reasons." Neither proposition strikes me as plausible.

So we must reject (M). And if we reject (M), we must reject Mental Statism.

## References

- Alston, W. 1988. An internalist externalism. *Synthese* 74(3): 265–283.
- Baehr, J. 2009. Evidentialism, vice, and virtue. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78(3): 545–567.
- Conee, E. and R. Feldman. 2004. *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Conee, E. and R. Feldman. 2008. Evidence. In *Epistemology: New Essays*, ed. Q. Smith. Oxford University Press.
- Gibbons, J. 2006. Access externalism. *Mind* 115: 19–39.
- Harman, G. 1973. *Thought*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Harman, G. 1980. Reasoning and evidence one does not possess. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5: 163–182.
- Kornblith, H. 1983. Justified belief and epistemically responsible action. *The Philosophical Review* 92: 33–48.
- Swain, M. 1981. *Reasons and Knowledge*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Turri, J. forthcoming. The ontology of epistemic reasons. *Noûs*.