

The Nature of Evidence Dissertation
Proposal—Final Pass

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I propose to write a dissertation on the nature of evidence. This is for two reasons. Firstly, elucidating what evidence is seems necessary to elucidating any evidentialist position in epistemology. Secondly, elucidating what evidence is seems necessary to figuring out whether any evidentialist position is *true*. I suspect that whether or not evidentialism is true depends largely on what conception of evidence the evidentialist brings to the table. I also suspect that the nature of evidence is far more plastic than evidentialists realize.

1 Evidentialism's pervasiveness

What is an evidentialist? She invokes the notion of evidence just about everywhere, since she believe that a whole host of important epistemological questions should be answered in terms of the notion of evidence.¹

Not everyone agrees on which epistemological questions are important. However, we can gather from the persistence of certain epistemological questions that *those* questions are important. The persistent epistemological questions concern the nature of knowledge, and of epistemic justification, the ethics of belief, the epistemic status of certain kinds of beliefs (e.g., scientific and religious beliefs), and the cogency of various skeptical arguments.

Evidentialist answers to the persistent epistemological questions are legion. The evidentialist about knowledge claims that having adequate evidence is a necessary condition

¹At the outset, let's distinguish between two kinds of evidentialist, the global and the local. The global evidentialist claims that *every* important epistemological question will be answered in terms of the notion of evidence. The local evidentialist claims that *some*—but not all—important epistemological question(s) will be answered in terms of the notion of evidence. Note that according to the way I define global and local evidentialism, they are contraries of one another; another way of defining them would be to say that local evidentialism is a special case of global evidentialism, in which case global evidentialism would entail local evidentialism.

on knowledge.² The evidentialist about epistemic justification claims that having adequate evidence is a necessary and sufficient condition on being epistemically justified.³ The evidentialist about the ethics of belief claims that believing p is permissible only if one's believing p is based on adequate evidence.⁴ The evidentialist objector to religious belief charges that religious beliefs are not based on adequate evidence, rendering them epistemically unfit in some way.⁵ Some skeptics might argue that no one has adequate evidence (that is, adequate for knowledge) for her beliefs about the external world (and some may even argue for the stronger conclusion that no one ever *could* have adequate evidence for their empirical beliefs).⁶

Despite their pervasiveness in epistemology, evidentialists haven't given a thoroughly worked-out account of their cardinal theoretical notion—evidence. This state of affairs should strike you as a bit strange. It may even inspire a little anxiety. If the concept of evidence is going to play a legitimate—indeed, cardinal—role in solving the many epistemological problems that philosophers put it to, then we philosophers of the epistemological tribe seem duty-bound to expose its contours and reckon whether it actually earns its keep.⁷ To leave off this task is to leave unfilled a lacuna in our philosophical understanding

²Chisholm 1957.

³Conee and Feldman 1985.

⁴Clifford [1877] 1999.

⁵See Plantinga 1983 for a critical discussion of an evidentialist objection to religious belief.

⁶Unger 1975.

⁷Nathan King has pointed out to me that one could interpret this claim in a much stronger sense than I intend. The duty I think epistemologists have is to satisfy their innate intellectual curiosity concerning the nature of evidence. A stronger claim would be that evidentialists must give an account of evidence's nature before we can take their position seriously. I have my doubts about this stronger claim. It seems that much fruitful epistemology has been done with a loose and intuitive conception of evidence. Besides, if evidentialists had this duty, then it seems that whenever any philosopher were to use something in her theory that had a loose and intuitive sense, she would have to give an account of its nature prior to using it. But this seems too strong. Philosophy has got to start somewhere; we can't analyze *everything* before we start philosophizing.

of the human cognitive condition.

Objection: One could respond to this line of reasoning by suggesting that we take the notion of evidence primitively, much like Williams (2000) takes the notion of knowledge. We then build up our epistemology around a primitive notion of evidence.⁸

Reply: This move is always available to us in philosophy. But in this case it feels like theft over honest toil. The analogy with Williamson's project is not apt, for one major reason Williamson gives in favor of taking the notion of knowledge as a primitive is that the past forty years of inquiry into the nature of knowledge has yielded no good conceptual analysis. This experience of head-meeting-brick-wall (repeatedly) does not apply in the case of evidence. There hasn't been a sustained inquiry into the nature of evidence. So we should give it the old college try before taking it as a primitive.

This dissertation is an effort to partially fill that lacuna. I propose to explore the nature of evidence in light of the roles it plays in putative solutions to central epistemological questions.

2 Chapter Abstracts

What follows here are summaries of what I intend to do in the chapters of this dissertation.

2.1 Chapter 1—A Guide to Theories of Evidence

A theory of evidence is anything that at least answers the following two questions:

The Ontological Question: What *is* evidence? In other words, what kinds of things can

⁸Thanks to Nathan King for pressing this objection.

be evidence?

The Possession Question: What is it for a believer to have something or things as evidence?

In chapter 1, I intend to provide a critical guide to theories of evidence in the literature, and perhaps interesting ones not vetted in the literature, but that still occupy logical space. The procedure will *à la* Jerry Fodor, proceeding with diagnostic questions.⁹

There are at least four interesting views with respect to the Ontological Question, each of which I intend to critically explore. They are the *Propositionalist* view, the *Mentalist* view, the *Objectual* view and the *Pluralist* view.

The Propositionalist claims that the only sorts of things that can be evidence are propositions; in short, evidence is propositional in nature.¹⁰

The Mentalist claims that the only sorts of things that can be evidence are mental states; in short, evidence is mental in nature. Mentalists fall into two mutually exclusive camps. One camp—call them the Liberal Mentalists—claim that experiences, in addition to beliefs, can be evidence.¹¹ The Liberal Mentalists are opposed by the Illiberal Mentalists, who claim that only beliefs can be evidence.¹² There is another division—somewhat orthogonal to the divide between Liberal and Illiberal—within the Mentalist camp between those who think that only *narrow* mental states (i.e., those that supervene only on factors

⁹See Fodor 1985. His procedure there is to map the interesting and live options in logical space using a decision tree.

¹⁰Timothy Williamson (2000) is the most prominent defender of this view.

¹¹One could argue that some foundationalists about the structure of justification are Liberal Mentalists. I say “some” because it’s not sure whether all the so-called “externalist” foundationalists would count. Thanks to Nathan King for pointing this out to me.

¹²Coherentists about the structure of justification may be plausibly interpreted as Illiberal Mentalists. See also Davidson 1986.

“inside the head”) can be evidence, and those who think that *broad* mental states can be evidence. Call the former Narrow Mentalists, the latter Broad Mentalists.¹³

The Objectual conception of evidence is familiar from legal contexts. The Objectualist claims that concrete objects—things like ordinary middle-sized dry goods (documents, bloody gloves, smoking guns) and events (taken as concrete) are evidence. Many philosophers seem to think that this position really doesn’t have much to offer for it, since it never seems to merit serious consideration in the literature. But perhaps this is too quick, at least in the case of some perceptual beliefs. One may think that concrete objects are the *truth-makers* for one’s perceptual beliefs, and that, being truthmakers, they function as evidence for one’s perceptual beliefs. The function of sense perception is to put one in touch with the evidence for one’s perceptual beliefs.¹⁴

The Pluralist claims that the many different kinds of things can be evidence. The Pluralist may be extremely generous; she may think that absolutely *anything* (quantifier wide-open) can be evidence. She may be more restrictive; for instance, perhaps propositions and ordinary objects can be evidence, or only ordinary objects and mental states, or just propositions and mental states.

On the Possession Question, there are many possible—and interesting—views. To a large extent, the answers one gives to the Possession Question will be posterior to the answers one gives to the Ontological Question.

¹³I’m hard-pressed to think of any Broad Mentalists, but we can make one. Imagine someone a whole lot like Timothy Williamson, but who thinks that the mental states themselves are evidence, not their contents. Call such a person Timothy Williamson*. Williamson* would be a Broad Mentalist. Another possibility would be Mark Johnston (2004 and 2006), but more on this coming in the next note.

¹⁴This could be a bare-bones exposition of a position that Mark Johnston (2006) defends. However, I’m not willing to bet my life that this is Johnston’s position. He may very well be a Broad Liberal Mentalist.

Suppose one starts with a Propositionalist answer to the Ontological Question. The Possession Question amounts to asking which of the many propositions “out there” are part of one’s total evidence set. Williamson’s (2000) view—that one’s evidence consists in all and only those propositions one knows—has garnered much attention recently.¹⁵ But one can imagine many other views: one’s evidence consists in all and only those propositions that one believes (a quite implausible view), or all and only those propositions one justifiably believes, or believes with warrant.¹⁶

If one starts with a Mentalist answer to the Ontological Question, the Possession Question amounts to asking which of one’s mental states counts as evidence.

I envision this first chapter to involve substantially—and critically—fleshing out the ideas mooted above. There will probably be some winnowing of the options down to those theories of evidence which stand the best chance of standing at the end.

2.2 Chapter 2—The Guide Continued: Evidential Support

In chapter 1, I will have laid out answers to questions concerning the nature of evidence, and how one comes to have something as evidence; in chapter 2 I then address a third question that a good theory of evidence should answer: how it is that evidence is supposed to *support* whatever it is supposed to support? Something that complicates matters is that the notion of evidential support is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, we speak of one proposition supporting another, as in an argument when a premise or set of premises supports a conclusion. On the other hand, we oftentimes speak of basing our beliefs on

¹⁵See, e.g., Brueckner (2005), Conee (2005), Hawthorne (2005), Yablo (2005) and Williamson (2005), Neta (2008), Brueckner (forthcoming) and Goldman (forthcoming).

¹⁶Neta 2008 discusses many of these options.

the evidence. It isn't clear that there is one notion of evidential support at work in both instances.

Let us take the former notion, that which we speak of when we say that one proposition supports another. Call this *propositional* evidential support. Some candidates for this relation are expressed by the open sentences “ x entails y ”, “ x raises the probability of y ”, “ x confirms y ”, “ x best explains y ”, “ x indicates the truth of y ”, and so on. This relation is a quasi-logical or metaphysical relation that obtains between propositions, and propositions only.¹⁷

Propositional evidential support differs from what I shall call *evidential grounding*. This is the relation expressed by the open sentence “the evidence e grounds ϕ -ing p ,” where ϕ is a schematic variable taking propositional attitudes as its values. We restrict the range of acceptable propositional attitudes to things like believing, disbelieving, withholding, accepting, and so on. In the case where one's evidence is propositional in nature, it is plausible to think that one's evidence e evidentially grounds believing p only if e propositionally evidentially supports p .

But what if one thinks that evidence is not propositional in nature,¹⁸ or that at least some evidence isn't propositional in nature?¹⁹ In such cases, the notion of evidential grounding is going to be—in part—psychological in nature. For instance, one may think that one's evidence is experiential in nature, and that one's evidence e evidentially grounds p just in the case that e is *supposed to* cause belief in p .²⁰

¹⁷Well, we might say that sentences or statements also enter into these relations. But *I* would say they do so in virtue of expressing propositions that enter into these relations. But we needn't enter into the metaphysics of propositions just yet (and hopefully not ever in this dissertation).

¹⁸As the Mentalists will claim.

¹⁹As Pluralists will claim.

²⁰This is the beginning of a proper functionalist theory of evidential grounding. See Bergmann 2006:

A minor task of this chapter is to give a taxonomy of the various ways in which philosophers have construed the two evidential support relations mooted above. In particular, I will be interested in mating conceptions of the nature of evidence discussed in chapter 1 with the appropriate conceptions of evidential support. As one might have noticed, the notion of propositional evidential support fits very nicely with a Propositionalist theory of evidence, while the notion of evidential grounding fits very nicely with the Mentalist and Objectual theories of evidence.

These various relations of fit ground arguments in favor of one or another theory of evidence. The main task of this chapter is to examine these arguments. For instance, Timothy Williamson (2000) argues from a conception of how evidence is supposed to work to his Propositionalist theory of evidence.²¹ One may imagine that there are also arguments from the notion of evidential grounding to either Mentalist or Objectual theories of evidence. One interesting question is how probative these arguments are in establishing whether a particular theory of evidence is the right one. What if they are inconclusive (as is my suspicion)? What if everything is a wash? My suspicion is that the existence of two notions of evidential support—and the absence of conclusive argument from either notion to a theory of evidence—supports the Pluralist theory of evidence. Hopefully, I can substantiate this suspicion.

2.3 Chapter 3—Evidence and Knowledge

For the past thirty or so years, epistemologists have debated whether or not having adequate evidence is a necessary condition on knowledge. Those who say Yes are the eviden-

chapter 5.

²¹See also Neta 2008.

tialists; their opponents are the nonevidentialists.

First, let me distinguish the debate between evidentialists and nonevidentialists (the E/N debate hereafter) over the correct account of knowledge from that interminable debate between internalists and externalists over the correct account of knowledge (the I/E debate hereafter). The two debates are similar insofar as both are metaepistemological in essence—they both concern the nature of key epistemic concepts, viz., knowledge, warrant, epistemic justification, rationality, etc. In fact, in late 20th century discussions, they seem to map to one another quite nicely: externalists are typically nonevidentialists while internalists are typically evidentialist. However, it is a mistake to confuse the two debates. How is this so?

At root, the I/E debate is over whether some (or all) of the necessary conditions for a particular positive epistemic status (it could be knowledge, epistemic justification, warrant, rationality, etc) are internal or external. The E/N debate is over whether having adequate evidence is a necessary condition on knowledge. Supposing it is, we can then ask the question whether having adequate evidence is “internal” or “external” in the sense specified. It is an accident of history that most (if not all) evidentialists happen to think that having adequate evidence is an internal condition. But this needn’t be so. One could come up with an externalist theory of having adequate evidence.

Allow me to briefly sketch such a position, and show that it rightly deserves to be called an externalist evidentialism.²² Suppose McX were to think that mere *seeings* of objects (i.e., ordinary middle-sized dry goods) are evidence²³ Suppose he also were to believe that

²²The kind of theory of evidence that follows would qualify as a Broad Liberal Mentalist theory of evidence, in the terminology of my first chapter.

²³“Seeings” is somewhat of a grammatical barbarism. “Sightings” would be better; nonetheless I will continue to speak of “seeings” since it conveys my sense better.

one knows p only if one has adequate evidence that p . So when Martha sees an apple on the table, she has evidence for her belief that there is an apple on the table; she might even know it. One observation is that seeing an apple is a *broad* mental state, which is to say that whether or not one is seeing an apple depends on circumstances outside of one's head. This observation suffices to show that McX's evidentialism is not internalist in the sense that mentalism gives to it.²⁴ Mentalism as usually understood entails that one's evidence consists in all and only those mental states that are narrow, i.e., that supervene on factors "inside the head."

But there are at least two other ways in which a metaepistemology can be internalist: (1) it can require that one has something as evidence only if one has access to it or (2) it can require that one has something as evidence only if that thing is part of one's "perspective," where one's perspective consists of all of one's justified beliefs.²⁵ McX's brand of evidentialism is obviously not a kind of perspectival internalism; he does not require that Martha even have beliefs (much less justified ones) about her seeing.

What about access internalism? Here, things are less clear, if only because the notion of access in play is not clear. If access to x is taken to involve the ability to form an infallible belief about x , then it doesn't seem that seeings are accessible. After all, one could be hallucinating, or subject to illusion. But suppose we define some weaker notion of access. One could still think that it is possible that Martha lack the concept of seeing, and so be unable to form any beliefs concerning her seeings.²⁶ If one thinks that accessibility always involves the formation of beliefs, then in such a case, Martha will be unable to access her

²⁴Conee and Feldman 2001.

²⁵See Alston 1986.

²⁶Perhaps she is too young.

seeing, yet she will still have evidence for her belief about the apple.

So the moral of the story: do not confuse the E/N debate with the I/E debate.

Back to the main issue. My suspicion is that E/N debate is fundamentally about the nature of evidence, and only derivatively about the nature of knowledge. Let me first explain how option this would work out.

Suppose we took a paradigm nonevidentialist—say Alvin Goldman (1979), or Michael Bergmann (2006), or Ernest Sosa (2007), just to name a few—and were to discover that hidden within their accounts of knowledge lay something that looked like it could answer to some plausible conception of evidence. (Ideally, it would answer to a conception of evidence laid out in chapter 1.) In fact, I think we can do just that. Take Bergmann for example:

In order, therefore, not to give any hint of endorsing a form of internalism or mentalist E_{PF} should be replaced with:

I_{PF} S's belief B is justified iff B is a PF-induced doxastic response to the *input* to S's belief-forming systems.

... The only restrictions I_{PF} places on what counts as an appropriate input to one's belief-forming processes are (a) that the input is something to which the belief is a (causal) response and (b) that the input is something to which the subject is *supposed to* have the doxastic response in question (where the 'supposed to' has to do with proper function).²⁷

Here what Bergmann is doing is changing his principle E_{PF} to I_{PF} by substituting "input"

²⁷2006: 131.

in the latter for “evidence” in the former, in effect conceding that evidence is whatever the internalist or mentalist says it is. But does he really *need* to do this? One could very well argue that the internalist or mentalist has the wrong conception of evidence, and that whatever Bergmann is picking out with “inputs” fits a plausible conception of evidence. This is something worth exploring, and it’s something I intend to explore—in Bergmann’s case and in the case of other paradigm nonevidentialists.

I suspect that if one construes the notion of evidence in non-standard—but still plausible—ways, then it may very well turn out that paradigmatic examples of nonevidentialist theories of knowledge do impose a condition of adequate evidence on knowledge. And this leaves us with the tantalizing question: what conception of evidence should we favor? Should we stick to the paradigm evidentialist’s conception? Or can we legitimately take things like Bergmann’s doxastic inputs as evidence?

2.4 Chapter 4—Evidence and Skepticism

Consider the following skeptical argument:

Evidentialism: For some believer S and some proposition p , S knows p only if S has evidence adequate for knowledge of p .

Evidence Skepticism: For no believer S and no proposition p is it the case that S has evidence adequate for knowledge of p .

General Knowledge Skepticism: For no believer S and no proposition p is it the case that S knows p .

There are various ways to restrict this argument and get different varieties of skepticism. For instance, to get the usual external-world skepticism, one merely restrict the propositions in Evidence Skepticism to those about the external world. To get skepticism about religious belief, one merely need restrict oneself to propositions about religious subject matter.

There are numerous things I would like to explore in this chapter, all in the vicinity of this skeptical argument. One thing I would like to explore is whether Evidence Skepticism presupposes a particular theory of evidence. I'm inclined to think that it does, viz., what I call the Narrow Liberal Mentalist theory of evidence. In fact, I think one major reason that Narrow Liberal Mentalists accept their theory of evidence is that it "makes sense of skepticism" the best. I think they're probably right. However, I also think that adopting their conception of evidence amounts to dealing the skeptic a winning hand. I would like to argue that the usual method—inference to best explanation—for refuting the skeptic given a Narrow Liberal Mentalist conception of evidence fails, in part because it fails to respect the connection between evidence and truth. So one reason for accepting a particular theory of evidence is undermined.

Something else worth exploring is whether any of the other theories of evidence can provide a basis for running the above skeptical argument. It isn't immediately apparent that any of them do; then again, things may turn out differently all things considered. Can any plausible defense of Evidence Skepticism be mounted given a different theory of evidence?

Yet another thing to consider would be dropping the evidentialism about knowledge and exploring what the implications of the following thesis would be: we have knowledge,

but not adequate evidence.

2.5 Chapter 5—Consequences of the Plural Nature of Evidence

I only have very vague ideas as far as what the consequences of a Pluralistic theory of evidence would be. I have more questions than answers at this point. For instance, one interesting question is whether or not evidentialism is a viable theory of knowledge given the truth of a Pluralistic theory of evidence. Suppose it is. Does it follow that knowledge itself is pluralist in nature? Would there be different kinds of propositional knowledge? What would follow if that were the case?

Supposing Pluralism about evidence is true, how cogent are skeptical arguments framed in terms of evidence? This is an especially interesting question if knowledge itself ends up being pluralist in nature.

We might also wonder what the consequences of a Pluralist theory of evidence are for the theory of epistemic rationality. If the nature of evidence is plural, is the nature of epistemic rationality plural too?

3 A summary of my suspicions

Here are some of the suspicions which I hope to substantiate in this dissertation:

1. That the correct theory of evidence is a pluralist one, of one type or another.
2. That the E/N debate is fundamentally a debate over the nature of evidence.
3. That the arguments in favor of one or another particular theory of evidence that

proceed from a particular notion of evidential support are a wash, and that this fact supports some pluralist theory of evidence.

4. That one reason given in support of a Narrow Liberal Mentalist theory of evidence—namely, that it best makes sense of skepticism—is undermined by the fact that adopting such a conception leaves philosophers with not good response to the skeptic.

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What follows is not merely a reference list, but a tentative bibliography for the dissertation.

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