

Evidence One Ought to Have

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The Bored Intelligence Analyst: After years of sifting through mounds of intelligence data for the NSA and never finding anything remotely interesting, Carl, an intelligence analyst, becomes bored with his work. Consequently, he becomes less careful and attentive to the data he is responsible for analyzing. One day, while Carl listens to a data tape recording of a cellphone conversation between suspected terrorists, he starts daydreaming about being Jack Bauer from *24*. Due to his daydreaming, he fails to hear one of the conversation’s interlocutors give details of a terrorist plot. His supervisor’s entrance into the room jars him back to attention, but not in time for him to register the details of the plot. Under the watchful eye of his supervisor, Carl finishes listening to the tape. He hears nothing else of import on the tape—in fact, before he started daydreaming, he heard nothing of import too; all he hears are boring stories about the troubles one interlocutor is having with an unscrupulous Jersey car mechanic. He files the tape in the “Completed” cabinet and forms the belief that the people on the tape didn’t discuss a terrorist plot over the course of their recorded conversation.¹

There is a kind epistemic failure occurring in this case. This failure is due to the fact that Carl’s belief that the people on the tape didn’t discuss a terrorist plot over the course of their recorded conversation—call this belief *B*—lacks a certain interesting epistemic status. To fix the reference of the property I am interested in, I will call the interesting epistemic status that *B* lacks **TIES** (for “The Interesting Epistemic Status”).

In this paper, I want to argue that the best way to understand TIES is in terms of the evidence an epistemic agent (in this case, Carl) ought to have. This happens in §1. In §2 I defend the supposition that TIES is in fact an interesting *epistemic* status, and

not something else. To do this, I sketch a plausible account of belief-formation wherein evidence one ought to have plays a crucial epistemic role. The proposed takeaway of this defense of TIES is that project of understanding epistemic evaluation should be broadened to include the ways in which evidence is gathered. In §3, I conclude by discussing a datum that any account of the evidence one ought to have must respect.

§1

Some philosophers might approach the case of the Bored Intelligence Analyst (hereafter **BIA**) by arguing that TIES=epistemic rationality. According to a venerable philosophical tradition,² whether someone's belief is epistemically rational or not is fully determined by the evidence one has. Call this thesis **TEH**:

TEH: For all S and for all p , S is rational in believing p iff for some e , e is evidence that S has and e adequately supports p .³

A diagnosis which invokes TEH would go like so: B does not fit some evidence that he has; by TEH, it follows that his belief is irrational. A belief's being irrational is surely a salient epistemic failure, so it's plausible to think that the failure involved in BIA is a failure of rationality. So, it's plausible to think that TIES=epistemic rationality.

But this diagnosis does not work. On the plausible accounts of what it is to have evidence B fits Carl's evidence. So there is no failure of epistemic rationality in BIA. To see this, let us examine what verdicts arise concerning BIA when we combine TEH with a few representative accounts of the evidence one has.

Consider first Richard Feldman's (1988) account of the evidence one has: S has e as evidence iff S is thinking of e .⁴ It seems plausible to think that, given all Carl is currently thinking of—given all the occurrent perceptual experiences and memorial seemings that Carl has at the time of his belief— B is rational.⁵ According to the story, Carl fails to even *hear* the terrorist's talking about their plot; consequently, he lacks any perceptual experience of hearing them talking about their plot, or any memorial seeming to the effect that he heard them talking about their plot.⁶

Now consider what we might call a Davidsonian theory of the evidence one has, where one's evidence consists entirely of what one believes.⁷ Even as underdescribed (with respect to what other beliefs Carl has) as BIA is, it doesn't seem hard to imagine a belief set he could have wherein B rendered rational according to TEH. The same goes for a theory of the evidence one has that counts only justified or rational beliefs.

Finally, consider Timothy Williamson's (2000, chap. 9) account of the evidence one has: one's evidence coincides with one's knowledge. But clearly in BIA, nothing Carl knows renders B irrational for him. So no plausible account of the evidence one has combined with TEH explains the epistemic failure found in BIA.

Here is a principle which does explain the epistemic failure (i.e., *B*'s lacking TIES) in BIA:

EOH: *S*'s belief that *p* has TIES iff there is some *e* such that *e* is the evidence *S* ought to have and *S*'s belief that *p* fits *e*.

Here is how EOH explains the epistemic failure in BIA: intuitively, Carl ought to have heard the terrorists discussing their plot on the tape. This is evidence that Carl ought to have.⁸ Because *B* obviously does not fit this piece of evidence, *B* lacks TIES.

We still have many questions, in particular why should we think that TIES is an interesting *epistemic* status?

§2

Some philosophers may agree that I have diagnosed a failure in BIA, and that EOH explains it; however, they may be skeptical that I have diagnosed an *epistemic* failure; consequently, they may be skeptical of TIES's *epistemic* importance. In this section I aim to dispel their skepticism.

First, let us consider a plausible model of belief formation: suppose that I am curious about what to believe on a certain subject matter. To quench my curiosity, I proceed in several steps. Step 1: I gather evidence. Step 2: I consider all the evidence that I gather. Step 3: I form beliefs in light of that evidence.⁹

TEH is a principle which evaluates the transition from the second step to the third step. The salient failure in BIA involves the first step. Question: why think that principles which govern the normative status of the first step in belief formation—principles like EOH—are interesting in any epistemic sense?

Consider BIA again, but with a slight modification:

MBIA1: Suppose that on the audio tape, there is a segment where voices indistinguishable from those of the suspected terrorists discuss a terrorist plot. But also suppose that somehow the device recording the cellphone conversation accidentally picked up the audio feed from the TV station's network broadcast of an episode of *24*, and that the voices discussing a terrorist plot are just actors in a television series.

It seems like MBIA1 is akin to a Gettier case: Carl's belief that the suspected terrorists didn't discuss a terrorist plot on the recording is true and rational (by TEH). But certainly it isn't *knowledge*. And so, one argument might go, principles like EOH are epistemically interesting in virtue of specifying necessary and sufficient conditions on the instantiation of a property—TIES, in this case—which is necessary for knowledge.

One response to this argument is to note that, whatever the fourth condition on knowledge is, surely it will subsume cases like MBIA1. This is right, but it runs together two kinds of Gettier case which should be distinguished, because they differ epistemically. To see how, consider also a different case:

The Responsible Intelligence Analyst: Tony is a responsible and attentive intelligence analyst. He also listens to the cellphone recording which Carl listens to earlier (Carl's supervisor doesn't trust Carl, so he wants to double-check everything). Now, suppose that in transit between Carl's and Tony's desk, the tape is damaged—enough to garble the segment of the tape which is actually a portion of 24. Tony listens to the entire tape and comes to the same belief that Carl does. Also suppose that the NSA always checks tapes after they've been analyzed for damage, and that if they're damaged, they have the facilities to repair them.¹⁰

If all that is *epistemically* relevant for comparing MBIA and the case of the Responsible Intelligence Agent (**RIA** for short) are TEH and (say) an analysis of knowledge as true undefeated rational belief, then it turns out that there are no epistemic differences between MBIA and RIA. They are both cases of true rational belief for which a rebutting defeater is salient. But surely this is implausible. There is an epistemic difference between the two cases. Epistemic differences supervene on a difference in epistemic properties.¹¹ The difference in TIES-instantiation is the only plausible candidate for the difference upon which the epistemic difference between MBIA and RIA supervenes. So, TIES is an epistemic property. As a corollary, we get the conclusion that the evidence one ought to have is epistemically relevant.

This corollary conclusion shouldn't be too surprising. After all, in everyday life, we often evaluate the ways in which epistemic agents gather their evidence. Imagine someone who tries to achieve an understanding of the world by immersing herself in the literature and social circles of New Age metaphysics. Her immersion is so deep (*really* deep), that all of her evidence supports the hypothesis that the world is ultimately a divine *chakra*. Suppose she follows the evidence she has and believes thus. She is rational according to TEH, but there is still profound epistemic failure: she fails to believe in accord with the evidence she ought to have.

Let us summarize the conclusions of this section. I have argued that TIES is an epistemic property of considerable interest, and that EOH is an interesting epistemic principle. The upshot of this is that we should adopt a broader investigative focus in epistemology, to encompass the ways in which the process of evidence-gathering can be evaluated. A corollary conclusion is that the evidence one ought to have is the main standard by which we should assess the ways in which we gather evidence.

§3

If I am correct that the evidence one ought to have plays a crucial role in evaluating the ways in which we gather evidence, then the natural thing to do is give a characterization of the evidence one ought to have. In this section, I do not have the space to do this; instead, I note a datum to which any adequate characterization of the evidence one ought to have should conform.

In §2 I proposed a model for belief-formation, a model which I intend to extend to the case of perceptual belief. You open your eyes and unplug your ears, and the world—thanks to your perceptual endowment—bombards you with evidence. Question: with respect to perceptual beliefs, what is the evidence one ought to have? This question is troubling, because although our native perceptual endowments provide us with *lots* of evidence about the perceptible environment about us, they surely miss lots of things. Human beings, in contrast to honeybees, cannot see light in the UV spectrum. Dogs are like deuteranopes—they are red-green colorblind. Surely human beings and dogs aren't responsible for evidence that is beyond their epistemic ken to acquire. I am not responsible to acquire as evidence experiences of the UV light in my environment. Fido is not responsible to acquire as evidence the experience of the color of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer's nose. Such a concept of the evidence one ought to have would be a theoretical dangler in one's epistemology; it would also lead to quasi-skeptical consequences. A more plausible concept of the evidence one ought to have would relativize the evidence one ought to have to one's cognitive powers:

CP: Something is part of the evidence one ought to have only if one is capable of acquiring evidence of that kind.

CP should be further refined, since whether one is capable of doing *A* depends upon circumstances one is in. If I'm blindfolded in a dark room, it is implausible to think that the evidence I ought to have includes a visual impression of the layout of the room.

CP*: Something is part of the evidence one ought to have in some circumstance *C* only if one is capable of acquiring evidence of that kind in *C*.

I have proposed only a necessary condition of something's being part of the evidence one ought to have. Of course, a necessary and sufficient condition would be ideal, but we'll save that task for later.

To conclude, I have argued that there is an epistemic failure in BIA, and that this epistemic failure is best analyzed in terms of a failure to gather the evidence that one ought to have. The hoped-for upshot is that we can broaden our epistemological investigations to include this concept.

Notes

¹For similar cases, see Kornblith (1983), Gibbons (2006) and the cases of defective inquiry in Baehr (2009).

²Which has come under attack recently by those who favor pragmatic encroachment in epistemology. See, for example Stanley (2005) and Fantl and McGrath (2002, 2007).

³See Conee and Feldman (1985). That *S* is rational in believing *p* does not entail that *S* actually believes *p*.

⁴“Thinking of *x*” should be construed here as thinly as possible. “Occurrently conscious of *x*” is an equally good characterization.

⁵Provided that we’re non-skeptics, that is. This caveat will apply to the rest of the accounts of the evidence one has as well. Leave worries about skepticism aside for the time being.

⁶The same story would apply to David Lewis’s (1996, 424) account of the evidence one has.

⁷“Nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief” (Davidson, 1986).

⁸What exactly is the evidence he ought to have? Is it the *hearing* of the terrorists discussing their plot? Or is it the proposition that the terrorists discuss a terrorist plot? I am going to remain neutral on how to answer this question; nothing important hinges on it for the purposes of this paper.

⁹This model of belief formation fits quite nicely with versions of Evidentialist Reliabilism. See Alston (1986) and Comesaña (forthcoming) for discussion of Evidentialist Reliabilism.

¹⁰This last stipulation is to permit the existence of a salient rebutting defeater for Tony’s belief.

¹¹The possibility of pragmatic encroachment complicates this premise, but I imagine that some of my immediate interlocutors are epistemic purists.

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