

Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

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Handout 5: More on Justified Belief and Evidence

Evidentialism: S has justification to believe that p = S's total evidence supports p

DeRose's questions

DeRose's target: S (epistemically) ought to believe that p = S's total evidence supports p

First question. Suppose Henry meets these three conditions:

1. Henry's total evidence supports p, but
2. Henry believes p not on the basis of his evidence, but on some irrational basis, and
3. Henry could easily get very strong evidence against p, and should, but doesn't.

DeRose asks: in the 'epistemic' sense of 'ought', ought Henry to believe that p?

DeRose's answer: seems like in the most natural 'epistemic' sense of 'ought', the answer is no. Certainly he doesn't *know* p, and this (it seems) is because he's not believing as he ought to. But evidentialist says yes, he ought to believe that p. Why should we care about *that* sense of 'ought'?

(Note that an evidentialist theory of *justified belief* will say that Henry's belief is not justified, since he doesn't believe on the basis of his evidence.)

Second question. Brain-in-a-vat (BIV) hypothesis. Ought we to believe that we're not BIVs?

DeRose's answer: yes. But does our total evidence support this? Hard to see how the answer could be yes: things seem to us exactly as they'd seem if we were BIVs. That leads to another set of questions.

What is your total evidence?

Feldman, p. 45:

In general, evidentialists will say that the evidence a person has at a given time consists of all the information the person has to go on at that time. This will include the memories the person has and the other justified beliefs he or she has. [...] The evidence you have consists of the information you have available, in some hard-to-specify sense, for your use.

Question: what is it for a piece of information to be "available" for you "to go on"?

Three attempts to answer the question:

1. S's evidence = all of S's perceptions, introspections and memories
This makes it implausible that S's total evidence supports not-BIV
2. S's evidence = everything S has justification to believe
But then evidentialism seems like a pretty empty claim. S has justification to believe $p = p$ is supported by everything S has justification to believe?
3. S's evidence = everything S is in a position to know
Hmm...

What is it for your evidence to support something?

Three types of evidential support:

1. *Probabilistic* support. E.g.:
e = the deck is fair, and your card was picked at random
h = your card is not the ace of clubs
e *probabilistically* supports h: given e, there is a 98% chance that h is true
2. *Abductive* support (also called *explanatory* or *causal* support). E.g.:
e = the bloody glove was found in Smith's trunk
h = Smith is the murderer
e *abductively* supports h: h *explains* why e is true, h is the *cause* of e
3. *Deductive* support (also called *entailment*). E.g.:
e = there is a fox in the yard
h = there is a mammal in the yard
e *deductively* supports h: given e, it's impossible for h to be false; e entails h

There may be other types of evidential support, but these three are central.