In Favor of Epistemic Reasons for Action

1. Introduction

The traditional view about epistemic and practical reasons says that epistemic reasons are reasons for belief, and practical reasons are reasons for action. This does not mean that epistemic reasons are just any reasons that favor forming some belief, since those could also be practical or moral. Rather, it means that epistemic reasons are evidential. They bear an evidential support relation to a proposition that is the content of belief. The staunchest defenders of this view are evidentialists of the Conee and Feldman stripe. I will argue that even by their own lights, this traditional distinction does not hold up; rather, there can be epistemic reasons that are not just evidential, but are reasons for action.

1.1 Preliminary Bolstering (of the idea of epistemic reasons for action)

Before I present the argument, let me offer a couple preliminary ways of bolstering the idea of epistemic reasons for action. These fall short of arguments that there can be epistemic reasons for action. I present them here in order to establish that the idea need not necessarily strike us as radical.

First, there is no in-principle barrier to reasons for action that are not practical. Indeed, we readily accept that there can be moral reasons for action. Although this does not show that there could be reasons for action that are neither practical nor moral, it establishes that we already accept that talk of non-practical reasons for action is not a category mistake. There is no in principle reason to think that actions could not be supported by other kinds of reasons.¹

Second, some have argued that beliefs constitutively aim at truth. Actions can be good ways of complying with the truth prescription. Often, seeking more information about \( p \) is the best available means of bringing it about that I believe the truth about \( p \). This gives us some positive reason to think that there is a connection between epistemic reasons and action.

¹ This of course leaves open that there could be in principle reasons to think that epistemic reasons in particular could not support action. But that is what the main argument will deal with.
2. Evidentialism and Epistemic Reasons for Action

Why think evidentialism as a theory entails a prohibition on the possibility of epistemic reasons for action in the first place? To my knowledge, Conee and Feldman never spell this out explicitly. What follows is an explication of reasons I think they would give.

The first reason to think evidentialism prohibits epistemic reasons for action is that they are simply trying to give a theory of epistemic justification, as a component of knowledge, which they believe turns entirely on evidence. This means that their view of justification does not require anyone to seek evidence, or even to form doxastic attitudes at all. Whether one chooses to do those things is a pragmatic (and sometimes moral) matter. Evidentialism as a theory of epistemic justification simply says that the only way to form epistemically justified attitudes is to form those that fit the evidence one actually has at a time.

The second (related) point is that evidentialism is a theory of synchronic (not diachronic) rationality. Feldman says: “There are many ways in which one might behave over the long term that will help one to gain knowledge of important facts…Evidentialism is silent about such practices. It focuses on the epistemic value to be obtained immediately from the adoption of an attitude toward a proposition. The way to do that, in every case, is to follow the evidence one has (Feldman 2000, p.686).” So, the things one does diachronically do not matter for epistemic justification. I could gather my evidence in a wholly irresponsible way. As long as I then proportion my belief to that irresponsibly-gathered evidence, the belief counts as justified.

3. Argument

The following is a sketch of my argument.

P1. Evidentialism says that if S has any doxastic attitude towards proposition \( p \) at \( t \), then she epistemically ought to have the attitude that her evidence on balance supports at \( t \).\(^2\)

\(^2\) This formulation is from Feldman, 2000.
P2. Sometimes, it takes cognitive effort to figure out what one’s evidence on balance supports.

C1. At those times, S has epistemic reason to (that is, epistemically ought to) engage in cognitive action to figure out what her evidence on balance supports. ³ [from P1 and P2]

P3. There is no relevant difference between intentional cognitive actions (like thinking about how different parts of my evidence bear on one another) and intentional bodily actions (like looking up a paper that contains more information about p).

C2. If S can have epistemic reason to engage in cognitive action, then she can have such reason to engage in bodily action. [from P3]

C3. There can be epistemic reasons for action. [from C1 and C2]

3.1 The Argument for C1

C1 says evidentialism implies that sometimes, S has epistemic reason to engage in cognitive action. The argument for it begins with P1, which is Feldman’s formulation of evidentialism. The first crucial question is whether it follows from this that a subject can have reason to bring it about that she has the attitude that her evidence on balance supports. In other words, there are two different things that one might think follows from P1:

(1) If S’s doxastic attitude towards p at t is on balance supported by her evidence at t, then S’s doxastic attitude is justified at t.
(2) If S desires or intends to form a doxastic attitude towards p, then S has epistemic reason to bring it about that the doxastic attitude is proportioned to what her evidence on balance supports.

(1) is a straightforward analysis of evidentialist justification, which seems quite clearly to follow from P1. I do not take this to be controversial. But (1) does not say anything about what S ought to do. It only says that if the extant state of affairs is one in which S’s doxastic attitude is supported by the evidence she then has, her attitude is then epistemically justified. By contrast, (2) says that S does have epistemic reason to

³ If one thinks there is an important difference between saying S epistemically ought to engage in cognitive and S has epistemic reason to engage in cognitive action and action, then I can add a conditional premise: if S epistemically ought to engage in cognitive action then she has epistemic reason to engage in cognitive action. I think the argument I give for C1 will support both the antecedent and the consequent.
do something; namely, whatever is involved in bringing it about that her attitude is supported by her evidence.⁴

In order for P1 and P2 to imply C1, I need it to turn out that evidentialism implies (2) in addition to (1). I think it does, and I think there is evidence that Conee and Feldman agree. But I will also argue that if they do not in fact agree, they should agree given that they want evidentialism to be a theory of epistemic reasonableness or rationality.

The point of interpretation is non-trivial. Indeed, there is a possible way of reading P1 on which it simply says that it is an epistemically better state of affairs in which a person’s doxastic attitude is supported by her total evidence, over against a state of affairs in which her attitude is not so supported, because only in the former state of affairs is the person’s attitude epistemically justified. On this reading, when the evidentialist says they are simply trying to give a theory of what justified belief consists in, they mean that they are only trying to give a theory of epistemically better and worse states of affairs. It does not follow that anyone has epistemic reason to bring the better states of affairs about.

I do not think this is what Conee and Feldman intend, because it would require a very unnatural reading of some of the things they say. In Evidentialism, they say: “[Evidentialism] sets an epistemic standard for evaluating doxastic conduct. In any case of conduct, whether it is voluntary or not, it is appropriate to speak of ‘requirements’ or ‘obligations’ that the standard imposes. (Conce and Feldman 2004, p.87, my emphasis).” In The Ethics of Belief, Feldman says: “…a believer epistemically ought to form attitudes as directed by (O2): he ought to follow his evidence. This defense of (O2) depends on the substantive epistemological thesis that rationality consists in making one’s beliefs conform to one’s evidence (Feldman, 2000, p.685, my emphasis).” He goes on to say he takes this substantive thesis to be true, though he does not have the space to fully argue for it. These points seem clearly to support the idea that they intend their formulation of evidentialism to imply (2) as well as (1). When a subject desires or

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⁴ As I have it, (2) is formulated a bit awkwardly because it has dropped out of the analysis. This is because here, we are dealing with a process of bringing something about rather than an event. Ultimately, I do not take this to be a problem because I will argue that we should not think of evidentialism as a purely synchronic theory of rationality.

⁵ (O2) is identical to the formulation of evidentialism in P1.
intends to form a belief about \( p \), that gives her (hypothetical) epistemic reason to bring it about that her belief is proportioned to her evidence.

Regardless of their actual intentions, I think this is what Conee and Feldman should intend. Evidentialism purports to give a theory of epistemic reasonableness or rationality. And it is constitutive of reasonableness or rationality that one follows reasons because of or in response to their being reasons. One does not count as reasonable or rational, on the other hand, if they simply end up in a state of affairs in which they are in accordance with what reasons would favor.

3.1.1 Defending P2

I argued that by evidentialist lights, a subject can have epistemic reason to bring it about that her doxastic attitude is the one supported by her evidence. How much that requires of her – that is, that is how much cognitive work it gives her reason to do – depends on what counts as part of her evidence. On this picture, her evidence is what she has reason to account for in bringing it about that her attitude is proportioned to it. Does this include only what is immediately before her mind when she turns inward? Does it include that which is stored in her memory, but might take a moment to recall? Does it include logical consequences of things that are currently before her mind, even when she has not yet seen that they are consequences? Conee and Feldman recognize that there are question here, but leave them largely unanswered.

In the literature on justification, paradigmatic cases of belief formation seem to be those where it is relatively easy to determine what evidence the subject has and what it supports, so that believing what one’s evidence supports is more or less automatic. If I have a perceptual experience as of seeing a coffee cup on the table, then unless I have a strong defeater, my evidence on balance supports believing that there is a coffee cup on the table. Taking these cases as paradigmatic is misleading, because it obscures cases where proportioning one’s belief to the evidence is not so automatic, since it requires some cognitive effort to figure out what one’s evidence on balance supports.
To rule out the possibility of cases where it takes cognitive effort to figure out what one’s evidence supports – that is, to deny P2 – evidentialists would have to be very restrictive about what counts as a person’s evidence. I will argue that doing that makes justification too easy. In particular, to deny P2, evidentialists would need to argue: (1) that what counts as S’s evidence is restricted to what is immediately before her mind at a given time, so that she never has epistemic reason to call up evidence from memory; (2) that S’s evidence is restricted to the evidential connections she occurrently appreciates; and, (3) that evidential support is determined by the relative weights that S occurrently assigns to different pieces of her evidence.

If the evidentialist endorses (1)-(3), then it becomes nearly impossible for a subject to have an unjustified belief. One’s evidence supports whatever doxastic attitude it seems to support at the time. Presumably, this is not what we want from a theory of justification. On the other hand, if the evidentialist endorses the negation of (1), (2), or (3), then evidentialism is no longer purely a theory of *synchronic* rationality, since the subject then has epistemic reason to do some cognitive work that occurs over time rather than *at an instant*. This could include calling up information from memory, accounting for evidential connections, or weighing evidence that is already in working memory.

To see why endorsing (1)-(3) makes justification nearly automatic, consider the classic example of the parent who does not want to believe that their child did something unlawful. Suppose the child is accused of shoplifting, and the parent is presented with solid evidence that they did it – they see footage from the store’s security cameras, and later find the stolen merchandise in the child’s room. The natural judgment is that the parent epistemically ought to believe that their child shoplifted, and if they continue to believe otherwise, that belief is thereafter epistemically unjustified (though it might be morally or prudentially justified). But defense mechanisms and motivated reasoning being what they are, suppose that after the parent gets the evidence, they quickly and conveniently suppress the memory of it. If we endorse (1), then suppressing the memory is tantamount to losing the evidence, and their belief that the child did not do it is no longer unjustified. Alternatively, suppose the parent does not forget the experience of seeing the footage and the merchandise, but either does not think it supports the conclusion
that the child shoplifted (because there must be some other explanation); or, she sees that it supports that conclusion, but strongly believes that her child would not do that, and assigns that background belief more evidential weight than the experience of seeing the footage and the merchandise. If the evidentialist endorses (2) and (3), then again, it will turn out that the parent’s belief is epistemically justified. So if the evidentialist endorses (1)-(3), they do not have the resources to call the parent’s belief epistemically unjustified. Perhaps one could argue that this is the right result. But if so, they owe us an account of what it would take for the belief to be unjustified on their picture.

Given this choice between making justification nearly automatic, and making room for P2 by denying that evidentialism is purely a theory of synchronic rationality, I think Conee and Feldman should opt for the latter. I do not think it is problematic to deny that evidentialism is a purely synchronic theory. Indeed, *synchronic rationality* should be considered a misnomer. To see this, consider again that rationality requires following reasons, which is a process that has to happen *in time*, rather than at a time. Thus, rationality cannot be completely state based.

I do not think Conee and Feldman endorse (1)-(3). First, they seem to explicitly deny (1) in *Evidence*: “Versions of evidentialism can be developed that differ over what they count as one’s evidence at a time. Some restrictive versions count only one’s current conscious states. Some inclusive versions count everything stores in one’s memory. Moderate views count some but not all information. Thy extreme views have a kind of theoretical neatness, but they are burdened with implausible consequences (Conee and Feldman 2008, p.89).” Here, they reject (1) as one of the extreme views with implausible consequences. This is already enough to open the way towards saying that subject could have epistemic reason to exert cognitive effort; namely, that which is involved in calling something up from memory in order to proportion her doxastic attitude to it.

It is less clear what they think of (2) and (3), but they sometimes seem close to endorsing (2): “…the investigator must be informed of some indicator connection between this evidence and the conclusion for the evidence to have any epistemic impact for him. As we use the word ‘evidence’ in our statement of evidentialism, the investigator who is unaware of any such connection does not have the
evidence (Ibid., p.85).” This might be taken to imply an endorsement of (2). They do not address (3), and I suspect that this is because they think of it as a non-issue, assuming that the relative weights one assigns to different pieces of her evidence are simply built into what her evidence is, such that there is no open question about whether to assign them more or less weight. In any case, to the extent that they endorse (2) and (3), it pushes them back towards the horn of the dilemma that makes justification nearly automatic. Since that is a bad result, I conclude that they ought to reject (2) and (3) in addition to (1).

To make the foregoing theoretical argument more concrete, what follow are examples of cases where it might take some cognitive effort to figure out what your evidence on balance supports: Exerting cognitive effort to recall something one recently read about \( p \), and thinking through whether it conflicts with what a friend has just said about \( p \); doing some statistical reasoning to determine how much weight to assign a surprising survey result, given that the sample size was small.\(^6\)

### 3.2 The Argument for C3

Having established P1, the rest of the argument for C3 turns entirely on P3. My argumentative strategy here will be to offer some examples to motivate the idea that there is no relevant difference between cognitive and bodily actions, and then shift the burden to the evidentialist who does not find them convincing to point out a relevant difference. The following are examples in which there seems to be no relevant difference between the intentional cognitive actions on the one hand, and the bodily actions on the other: Exerting cognitive effort to call up some information from memory (cognitive action) \( \text{vs.} \) googling that information (bodily action); doing some statistical calculations mentally to figure out what conclusions one’s data supports (cognitive action) \( \text{vs.} \) using a pen and paper to do the same calculations (bodily action).

\(^6\) Other examples come from what dual process theorists in psychology refer to as \textit{System 2} processes generally. Indeed, the defining feature of such processes is that they require slow, controlled, and explicit effort on the part of the cognizer to figure out what her evidence supports (as opposed to \textit{System 1} processes, which are fast, automatic, and implicit).
These examples rely on the fact that the mental and bodily efforts perform the same function in each case. So, if one can have epistemic reason to perform these functions mentally, then it would be *ad hoc* to suppose that she could not have epistemic reason to perform them in ways that involve bodily action. Unless the evidentialist can identify a relevant difference, I conclude that they ought to agree that there can be epistemic reasons for action.

**References**


