

# On the Differentia of Epistemic Justification

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**Abstract:** How are we to distinguish epistemic justification for believing a proposition from other sorts of justification one might have for believing it? According to what I call *the received view* about the differentia of epistemic justification, epistemic justification is intimately connected to “the cognitive goal of arriving at truth” in a specific way no other sorts of justification can possibly be. However, I will argue that the received view is mistaken by showing that there are cases in which pragmatic justification for believing a proposition is related to the cognitive goal of arriving at truth in a way epistemic justification is supposed to be. The paper will close with a brief assessment of two possible rejoinders the received view might make to my objection.

**Keywords:** Justification, Epistemic Justification, Pragmatic Justification, The Cognitive Goal of Truth.

## Epistemik Gerekçelendirmenin Doğası Üzerine

**Özet:** Epistemik gerekçelendirmeyi diđer tür gerekçelendirmelerden nasıl ayırmalıyız? *Hâkim* görüş diyebileceğimiz bir fikre göre, epistemik gerekçelendirme “dođruya varma” diyebileceğimiz bilişsel hedefe diđer tür gerekçelendirmelerin olamayacağı şekilde yakın bir biçimde irtibatlıdır. Bu yazıda, hâkim görüşün yanlış olduğunu iddia edeceğim. Bu iddiam, bazı olası durumlarda pragmatik gerekçelendirmenin de dođruya varma hedefiyle olan irtibatının epistemik gerekçelendirmenin o hedefle kurduđu iddia edilen irtibatın aynısı olduğunu gösteren bir düşünce deneyine dayanıyor. Yazı, hâkim görüşün sunduđum itiraza karşı geliştirebileceđi iki yanıtın kısa bir deđerlendirmesi ile sonlanıyor.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Gerekçelendirme, Epistemik Gerekçelendirme, Pragmatik Gerekçelendirme, Doğruluk Hedefi.

The concept of epistemic justification is arguably the central concept in epistemology, the philosophical study of human knowledge. It is widely believed that epistemic justification is a necessary condition for propositional knowledge, and some philosophers have even gone so far to claim that it is the only distinctly epistemic ingredient in knowledge

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(David 2001). Philosophical debates concerning epistemic justification are in general concerned with providing answers to two different questions. One question is this: what is the relation between a given subject that is epistemically justified in believing a proposition and the “justifier”, that in virtue of which the subject (and her belief) is thus epistemically justified? The other question is this: what is the relation between propositions that a given subject is epistemically justified in believing?<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I will focus on a different question, which is this: how are we to distinguish epistemic justification for believing a given proposition from other sorts of justification one might have for believing it? Let me call this question *the individuation question*. The individuation question is more fundamental than the other two questions mentioned above in the sense that attempts to answer those two questions take it for granted that the individuation question is already answered. For instance, the question concerning the relation the subject needs to bear to the justifier in order for her to be epistemically justified assumes that we already have a grasp, however rudimentary it might be, of the individuation of epistemic justification, which presumably involves a grasp, however rudimentary it might be, of how epistemic justification is to be distinguished from other sorts of justification.

According to a traditional answer to the individuation question, epistemic justification is to be distinguished from other sorts of justification by reference to its intimate connection to the aim or goal of “arriving at truth”. In his attempt to articulate and defend this sort of answer, Bonjour writes:

The idea of justification is a generic one, admitting in principle of many specific varieties. Thus the acceptance of an empirical belief might be morally justified, i.e. justified as morally obligatory by reference to moral principles and standards, or pragmatically justified, i.e. justified by reference to the desirable consequences which will result from such acceptance...But none of these other varieties of justification can satisfy the justification condition for knowledge. Knowledge requires *epistemic* justification, and the distinguishing characteristic of this particular species of justification

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<sup>1</sup> As is well known, the two main competing answers to the former question are internalism and externalism, and the two main competing answers to the latter are foundationalism and coherentism.

is, I submit, its essential or internal relationship to the cognitive goal of truth. Cognitive doings are epistemically justified, on this conception, only if and to the extent that they are aimed at this goal – which means roughly that one accepts all and only beliefs which one has good reason to think are true. (1978, p. 5)

Bonjour offers various examples to illustrate the distinction between epistemic justification and other varieties of justification. Consider, for instance, Pascal's famous wager (BonJour 1985, p. 7). Pascal's argument for the rationality or reasonableness of believing in the existence of God rests on the claim that the consequences of believing in its existence are much more favorable than the consequences of disbelieving in its existence: if God exists, belief will be enormously rewarded and disbelief horribly punished; if God does not exist, the consequences of either attitude will be very negligible by comparison. This means that, assuming that Pascal's argument concerning comparative advantages of believing and disbelieving is a good one, there is a clear sense in which a rational or reasonable thing for us to do is to believe in God's existence: it would be in our best interest to believe rather than disbelieve that God exists. In other words, there is a clear sense in which a given subject that comes to believe that God exists on the basis of Pascal-style considerations is *justified* in her belief. Let us call the sort of justification for one's belief that rests on an assessment of the relative advantages of believing in view of one's interests, *pragmatic* justification. So, we can say that a Pascalian subject is pragmatically justified in believing that God exists.<sup>2</sup>

BonJour argues that pragmatic justification is not epistemic justification. He writes:

[T]he *kind* of justification [Pascal-style arguments] provide for the beliefs in question is not the right kind to satisfy the requirement for knowledge – no matter how strong it is in its own way and no matter whether the beliefs in question happen in fact to be true. It is...not epistemic justification. (1985, p. 7)

<sup>2</sup> An interesting question is whether one can bring oneself to believe a proposition solely on the basis of pragmatic reasons for believing that proposition. For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that the answer is yes. Furthermore, BonJour's formulation of Pascal's wager and pragmatic justification above presupposes an internalist conception of epistemic justification. For the sake of convenience, my discussion below will do the same. It seems to me that nothing essential hangs on this presupposition.

Suppose that our subject believes that God exists, that her belief is pragmatically justified in the sense defined above, and also that it is true that God exists. Now the question is whether these facts about our subject and God entail that our subject knows that God exists. The intuitive answer that Bonjour thinks we will be inclined to give is in the negative, despite the fact that all the three conditions that are widely believed to be necessary for knowledge (i.e. belief, truth, and justification) might initially appear to be satisfied (also that there are no Gettier-type problems in this case that prompt a negative answer). And, a plausible explanation of why we are intuitively inclined to answer the question in the negative is that pragmatic justification is not epistemic justification, the sort of justification that is required for knowledge.

Bonjour holds that what distinguishes epistemic justification from other sorts of justification such as pragmatic justification is that a given subject is epistemically justified in believing a proposition if, and only if, she “has a reason to think that [that proposition] is true.” It is clear, however, that as it stands, this cannot be the end of the story simply because pragmatic justification for believing a proposition also gives the subject a reason to think that that proposition is true. This simply follows from the innocuous assumption that justification for believing a proposition is justification for believing that that proposition is true, and the assumption holds for all species of justification. More specifically, a given subject believing that God exists on the basis of Pascal-style arguments has a reason not only to believe that God exists but also, and equivalently, has a reason to believe that it is true that God exists. Note also that a simple modification of Bonjour’s original thesis into something like “epistemic justification for believing a certain proposition has to do with having *epistemic* reasons to think that it is true” does not help because that would lead to the question “what distinguishes epistemic reasons from non-epistemic (say, pragmatic) reasons?”, which is in effect the same question as our original individuation question concerning the distinguishing characteristic of epistemic justification.

Let us now take a look at Feldman’s response to the individuation question. Feldman writes:

Suppose a person interested only in getting at the truth were in the position of [our Pascalian subject]. Such a person would set aside self-interested concerns [that pertain to the favorable consequences

of believing that God exists]. (You might think about a person who is going to place bets on the outcomes and is interested only in winning the bets.) That person would be interested only in what in fact is true. What would that person believe in that situation? It is clear that such a disinterested believer would not believe that [God exists]. (2002, p. 35)

Feldman's remarks appear to be more helpful than Bonjour's. It is clear that a subject whose sole aim is "getting at the truth" (or, somewhat more colorfully, whose sole concern is winning the bets, where one wins the bets only if one hits the truth) would not be moved by pragmatic reasons such as Pascal's and not come to believe that God exists on the basis of such reasons. The suggestion here is that the subject whose sole concern is getting at the truth but that is given only Pascal-style reasons for believing that God exists lacks a specific sort of justification, namely epistemic justification, for believing that God exists. The general idea is, roughly, that epistemic justification for believing that  $p$  is the sort of justification a subject whose sole aim is to discover whether  $p$  is true can have for believing that  $p$ .

I take it that Feldman's remarks capture the essentials of what many epistemologists conceive as the correct answer to the individuation question. Take a subject  $S$  that believes that  $p$ , and ask the question whether a disinterested subject  $DS$  whose sole concern is to discover whether  $p$  is true would (or should) believe that  $p$  on the basis of the reasons  $S$  has for believing that  $p$ . A traditional philosophical wisdom has it that  $S$  is epistemically justified in believing that  $p$  if, and only if, the answer to this question is in the affirmative.

What would a disinterested subject take as reasons for believing that  $p$ ? The answer is presumably that those propositions the truth of which our subject justifiably believes guarantees or makes (highly) probable the truth of  $p$  would be taken by her as reasons for believing that  $p$ .<sup>3</sup> Let me call the account of epistemic justification accommodated in this answer  $EJ$ . (A disinterested subject whose sole concern is to discover whether  $p$  is true would raise (only *sotto voce* perhaps) a question like whether the truth of some of the propositions that she justifiably believes guarantees

<sup>3</sup> It is clear that the idea at work here cannot be supposed to hold for the epistemic justification of the so-called basic or foundational beliefs. If there are such beliefs, as foundationalism claims, then a different account of epistemic justification needs to be given for them.

or makes probable the truth of  $p$  (and if the answer is yes, then she believes that  $p$ ). EJ captures (and further specifies) Bonjour's important insight that epistemic justification has an "essential or internal relationship to the cognitive goal of truth" (1978, p. 5).

Pragmatic justification, as I have maintained above, rests on assessing the consequences of believing a certain proposition. It is clear that the subject believing that God exists solely on the basis of an assessment of Pascal's wager is not epistemically justified according to the standards for epistemic justification accommodated by EJ: the reasons she has for believing that God exists neither guarantees nor makes probable that God exists. Can there be an instance of pragmatic justification for believing a proposition that by itself satisfies the standards for epistemic justification accommodated by EJ? Let me call the negative answer to this question *N*: pragmatic justification by itself can *never* satisfy the standards for epistemic justification accommodated by EJ. Combining EJ with *N* (and its suitably revised variants<sup>4</sup>), we get what I will call *the received view* about the differentia of epistemic justification.

However incomplete and in need of refinement, I believe that the received view is, as its label suggests, what many philosophers are inclined to give as an answer to the individuation question. Now, I will argue that there are cases in which pragmatic reasons for believing that  $p$  guarantee or make probable the truth of  $p$ ; and if this is so, then the received view, as it stands, cannot be correct: either EJ or *N* is false.

It is widely believed that the attitude a patient takes towards her disease may have certain effects on the prospects of her recovery. More specifically, a positive attitude like a patient's believing that she will recover from the disease might raise, to some significant extent, the chances that she will recover from it. Let us now consider the following scenario. I am a patient with a disease  $D$  and I know (or at least justifiably believe) that believing that I will recover from  $D$  raises the probability of my recovery to a very high degree. Furthermore, I believe that I will recover from  $D$ , and my reason for forming this belief is a pragmatic one, which is that my having that belief will raise the probability of my recovery to a very

<sup>4</sup> A "suitably revised variant" of *N* is what one gets when one replaces "pragmatic" by terms for other species of justification ("moral", "religious", and so on) in *N*. So, "moral justification by itself can never satisfy the standards for epistemic justification accommodated by EJ" would, for instance, be a suitable variant of *N*. In this paper, I will solely be concerned with the account that results from conjoining EJ and *N*.

high degree. What motivates me to bring myself to believe that I will recover from *D* is that the consequences of having that belief are favorable given my desire for self-preservation, just as what motivates a Pascalian subject to bring herself to believe that God exists is that the consequences of believing that God exists are favorable given her desire to avoid eternal pain and gain eternal pleasure.

The interesting thing about this scenario is that the advantageous consequence that I take into account in the process of coming to have the target belief that I will recover from *D* is the same as the content of that belief, which is that I will recover from *D*. This is not the case in the original example we have used to illustrate the idea of pragmatic justification. In the case of coming to believe that God exists on the basis of the comparatively favorable consequences of having that belief, the advantageous consequence (e.g., something like eternal grace) is not the same as the content of that belief, which is that God exists. This significant difference between the two cases provides the basis of an argument against the received view.

Now, according to the scenario just presented, I know (or justifiably believe) that believing that I will recover from *D* raises the probability of my recovery to a high degree and I believe, on this basis, that I will recover from *D* (and we may also safely grant that I have the metabelief that I believe that I will recover from *D*). The crucial point is that these facts about my doxastic situation by themselves guarantee that I satisfy the standards for epistemic justification accommodated by EJ: the truth of the propositions that I believe makes probable the truth of the target proposition that I will recover from *D*. It simply follows from the fact that believing that I will recover from *D* raises the probability of my recovery to a high degree and the fact that I believe that I will recover from *D*, that the probability of the proposition that I will recover from *D* is high. If this is so, then my epistemic justification for believing that I will recover from *D* in this case does not require anything more than my pragmatic justification for believing that I will recover from *D*. In this case, my being pragmatically justified in holding the belief that I will recover from *D* by itself is sufficient for my satisfying what is required by the received account for me to be epistemically justified in holding that very belief.

I will further elaborate on the point I am driving at by the case above by distinguishing the object-belief that I will recover from *D* from the

meta-belief that I believe that I will recover from *D*. Clearly, these are two different beliefs. For one thing, the object-belief might be true while the meta-belief is false, and *vice versa*. For another, I might have the object-belief without having the meta-belief: I might believe that I will recover from *D* without believing that I believe that I will recover from *D*. It is controversial whether I can have the meta-belief without having the object-belief but the fact that I might have the latter without having the former suffices to show that they are different.

Now, suppose someone asks me why I do believe (or what reason I do have for believing) that I will recover from *D*. This question is about my object-belief, the belief that I will recover from *D*, just as a question like “why do you believe that the next card you will draw from the deck is an ace?” would be a question about a possible object-belief of mine, the belief that the next card I will draw from the deck is an ace. Suppose that my answer to the query about my object-belief concerning my recovery goes as follows: “(i) Believing that I will recover from *D* raises the probability of my recovery to a high degree (and I want to be recovered from *D*). That is why (ii) I believe that I will recover from *D*. Furthermore, (i) and (ii) make it highly probable that (iii) I will recover from *D*.” Notice that (i) is, in the first instance, (a part of) my pragmatic justification for having the meta-belief (ii) and, subsequently, a (part of) my pragmatic justification for having the object-belief (i). Thus, my response to the query about my doxastic situation involves (or by itself counts as) a pragmatic justification for my belief that I will recover from *D*.

The important thing to note here is that the extended argument from (i) and (ii) to (iii) also involves (or by itself counts as) an epistemic justification for my belief that I will recover from *D* according to the standards of the received view. This is because the argument is such that the truth of its premises, (i) and (ii), makes probable the truth of its conclusion, (iii). Solely in virtue of being in a position to articulate the argument, I have epistemically good reasons to think that I will recover from *D*. This means that the received view gives us the result that the pragmatic justification presented in this case for (iii) is also epistemic justification for (iii). And, if this is so, the received view is mistaken in claiming that its characterization of epistemic justification is such that there is no other species of justification that can possibly fit it.

There are mainly two different ways in which the received view can

respond to the objection above. First, it might attempt to modify itself in such a way as to ensure that the argument from (i) and (ii) to (iii) does not count as epistemic justification. This requires a revision of the criteria for epistemic justification accommodated by EJ. It is not entirely clear to me how the modification might go because what the received view as it stands says about epistemic justification seems to me to be correct in its essentials. However, Armstrong (2000) might perhaps be of some help here. Armstrong calls the sort of beliefs the case above makes appeal to “self-fulfilling beliefs” (p. 83) and raises, in the context of his defense for externalism about justification, the following question: if a belief “ensures its own truth” (p. 84) (or, equivalently, if it is a self-fulfilling belief), “would we ever be prepared speak of knowledge here?” (p. 84) His reply goes as follows:

This situation is a peculiar one, and my intuitions, and I would suppose other people’s, are not completely clear on the matter. But it seems, on the whole, that we ought not to speak of knowledge here. The essential point of a ‘faculty of knowledge’, is that it should, in respect of what is known, be passive to the world. If the ‘reflection’ is achieved by our mind moulding the world, we are not knowing but creating. (p. 84)

Armstrong’s remarks suggest that I cannot be said to know whether I will recover from *D* (because my belief that I will recover from *D* is not “passive to the world” but “moulding” it). Taking its cue from Armstrong, the received view might perhaps say that similar remarks also apply to epistemic justification, the species of justification relevant or adequate to knowledge: the argument from (i) and (ii) to (iii) does not count as epistemic justification because, it might be maintained, epistemic justification should, in respect of what is believed, be “passive to the world” and not “mould” it.

Let me assume for the sake of the argument that epistemic justification should be “passive to the world” in the way relevantly similar to how Armstrong thinks knowledge should. The point I would like to make is that granting this “passivity” requirement by itself does not give us any principled modification of the received view. A straightforward revision of the received view would go, roughly, along the following lines: only those propositions the truth of which the subject (justifiably) believes guarantees or makes probable the truth of *p* and *the truth of which does not “mould the*

world" but is "passive in respect of"  $p$  are epistemic reasons for her to believe that  $p$ . However, this revision is not satisfactory as it stands because it is not clear whether maintaining that epistemic justification should respect the passivity requirement is simply a disguised way of insisting that epistemic justification cannot be based on pragmatic reasons some of which do not respect that requirement. And, without a clarification of this issue, the straightforward revision along the lines suggested above would be susceptible to concerns pertaining to its being merely an *ad hoc* evasion.

Secondly, the received view might attempt to abandon N, the thesis that epistemic justification is intimately tied to truth in a way that no other species of justification can possibly be. This response acknowledges that the goal of arriving at truth is not the sole propriety of epistemic justification, that there might well be some other species of justification (e.g. pragmatic justification) that, in some circumstances, serve that very goal. According to this response, it is mistaken to hold that pragmatic justification *never* serves the goal of arriving at the truth, that it is *only* epistemic justification that can possibly serve the goal of arriving the truth. However, it is also worth noting that a defender of this response can still, and plausibly to my mind, insist that it is only epistemic justification that *always* serves that goal. I am inclined to think that this is the correct response to the problem for the received view articulated above, but a defense of this idea will have to await another occasion.<sup>5</sup>

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