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Conservatism, Basic Beliefs, and the Diachronic and Social Nature of Epistemic Justification

ABSTRACT

Discussions of conservatism in epistemology often fail to demonstrate that the principle of conservatism is supported by *epistemic* considerations. In this paper, I hope to show two things. First, there is a defensible version of the principle of conservatism, a version that applies only to what I will call our *basic beliefs*. Those who deny that conservatism is supported by epistemic considerations do so because they fail to take into account the necessarily social, diachronic and self-correcting nature of our epistemic practice. Second, I will attempt to show how our basic beliefs are justified via this principle of conservatism.

Traditional epistemic conservatism is roughly the position that the fact that a belief is held provides prima facie justification for that belief. Discussions of conservatism in epistemology often fail to demonstrate that the principle of conservatism is supported by *epistemic* considerations; that is, such discussions have failed to show that beliefs justified by conservativism are thereby likely to be true. Indeed, criticisms of, for example, conservatism generally point out that there is no epistemic justification for a principle of conservatism, and that such a principle therefore has no place in our epistemic practice. In this paper, I hope to show two things. First, I hope to show that there is a defensible version of the principle of conservatism, a version that applies only to what I will call our *basic beliefs*. According to this version of conservatism, these basic beliefs are justified by their history, and so an epistemic agent is entitled to these beliefs even if she is not able to provide any inferential justification for them. Those who deny that conservatism is supported by epistemic considerations do so because they fail to take into account the necessarily social, diachronic and self-correcting nature of our epistemic practice. It will emerge that justification is essentially historical in nature, and that the history an epistemic practice must have in order to be justification-conferring is a generations-long history. Thus, this historical requirement on justification makes justification social as well. The second conclusion I will attempt to establish is that this principle of conservatism explains how our basic beliefs are justified. The principle of conservatism which is defended in this paper will have several qualifications, but it would be premature to introduce them now; let us see how they emerge dialectically as the paper progresses.

In this paper, I will be primarily interested in giving an account of justification or justification attributions. I am not sure that all our uses of the verb 'to know' have anything in common, or that a unified theory of knowledge can be given. Although I will occasionally speak of knowledge, this paper will focus primarily on the more modest task of showing some of justification's underpinnings. Two terminological notes are in order. First, I will use 'justified' and 'rational' as synonymous. This claim is not intended to carry any theoretical weight; it is merely a stipulation for the sake of clarity and convenience. Second, the phrase 'basic belief' is not used in the way that, e.g., Plantinga uses this term, to mean non-inferential (e.g., observational) beliefs. I am using the phrase to refer to beliefs which are so basic to our system of beliefs that it is difficult or impossible to provide any inferential justification for them at all. The notion is borrowed from Wittgenstein's notion of framework beliefs in *On Certainty*, those beliefs which cannot be justified inferentially. I will give a fuller account of basic beliefs as the paper progresses.

I. Conservatism and Diachronic Justification

It has been argued that conservatism is an unavoidable part of justification. For example, Lawrence Sklar has argued that "conservatism lies at the very basis of any possible structure for justifying beliefs at all."[1] Sklar starts with the seemingly undeniable premise that "all epistemic justification is relative to an assumed background of believed theory."[2] From this starting point, Sklar argues as follows:

> *[W]e must realize that all justification is "local." We justify the beliefs we take to be in need of justification "one at a time," using all the resources of our unchallenged background belief in the process. Such "local" justifications are the only justifications of which we can make sense, for all justification requires a body of unchallenged background belief, and we never could justify our totality of beliefs "all at once."*[3]

Thus, all local justification occurs in the context of a set of background beliefs that is merely accepted, and cannot be argued for. This is not a new position. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein writes, "I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false."[4] To give an example, when I get out of bed in the morning, I don't have to consider the hypotheses that putting my feet on the floor will cause them to explode, or that turning off my alarm clock will cause demons to rain out of the heavens. Without a background theory of the world ruling out such hypotheses, uncertainty would rule, and no action would be possible. Of course, I don't explicitly consider these bizarre hypotheses, and judge them unworthy of further consideration. I merely behave as if they were false, and they never enter my mind. This is why, I think, Wittgenstein says our knowledge is grounded in a certain way of acting:[5] our knowing something is in many cases not a matter of considering and rejecting rival hypotheses; instead, it is in large part a matter of acting in a way that is incompatible with belief in such rival hypotheses. We have a way of acting, a way of ignoring certain hypotheses, that guides our empirical inquiry, and shapes how we explore the world. Normally, we don't need to respond to challenges to this way of acting; I don't need to justify ignoring these rival hypotheses. Rather than standing in need of justification, this way of behaving provides the background against which our other beliefs are justified. But our way of acting as if certain hypotheses are false forms the riverbed in which the water of our empirical knowledge flows, to use Wittgenstein's analogy.

A critic, however, will no doubt say that this picture of justification is a picture of dogmatism, a system that allows a background system to be held conservatively, without (inferential) justification. The way of acting needs no justification, indeed! And indeed this would be a picture of dogmatism if there were no way of providing a justification for our "unchallenged background belief[s]". But there is a way in which we can transcend mere local justification, and give a justification that encompasses Sklar's "assumed background of believed theory." Let us see how this more global justification is to be provided.

The picture of justification just outlined only looks dogmatic if you look at it as a static system, with an immovable foundation. However, our background theories that tell us which hypotheses to ignore are themselves revisable. The riverbed moves over time. Consider the proposition, "The earth is the center of the universe." In the 1920s, the astronomer Edwin Hubble made an interesting observation: in every direction you look, galaxies are receding from the earth. Furthermore, the farther away a galaxy is, the faster it is receding. How did scientists explain this observation? Significantly, nobody suggested the hypothesis that the earth is at the center of the universe; that hypothesis was not one that even merited discussion. Scientists eventually settled on the hypothesis that space itself is expanding. It was a revisionary hypothesis, but no one was willing to postulate a geocentric universe. Notice, though, that 1,000 years ago, the proposition "The earth is at the center of the universe" was not merely a hypothesis that needed to be taken seriously; cosmological hypotheses which conflicted with this belief were immediately rejected. Thus, the hypothesis that the earth is at the center of the universe started out as a proposition used to *test*

hypotheses, and ended up as a hypothesis to be discarded without serious consideration.[6] It is for this reason that Wilfrid Sellars writes:

> *Above all, the [traditional picture of knowledge] is misleading because of its static character. One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?). Neither will do. For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a foundation but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once.*[7]

As our system of empirical knowledge evolves through revision (which revision occurs through argument and the "tribunal of experience," as Quine calls it), we sometimes realize that what were groundless beliefs, in no need of justification, are false and need to be discarded. That is why our system of knowledge is rational: it is rational because no belief has been in principle immune to revision. We are justified in ruling out hypotheses such as "Demons will fall from the heavens if I turn off my alarm clock" because our theory of the world which dictates that such hypotheses be ignored has survived the tribunal of experience, and because the theory has been revisable in light of evidence that it is false. *Revisability*, not a foundation, is the source of justification.[8]

So judging requires that certain background beliefs merely be accepted without being argued for. Recall Wittgenstein's quote, which was cited earlier: "I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false."[9] But this is not dogmatism, because these background beliefs evolve as our empirical knowledge grows.[10] It is through the evolutionary pressures imposed on theory by experience that old background beliefs get rejected and new ones introduced. And it is this evolution over time—this revision of background beliefs over time, to better accord with experience—that allows us (correctly) to regard these background beliefs as adequate.[11] For even if we didn't choose these background beliefs ourselves, they are not arbitrary: they are the product of millennia of empirical inquiry. This fact is what makes our body of empirical knowledge rational. Our critic, then, misunderstands the nature of justification: she thinks that for a system to be justified at time t, it must be possible at time t to give an explicit justification for any belief in the system. But this picture of justification ignores the fact that only some beliefs are justified this way; others (namely our basic beliefs) are justified purely by their history. Thus, the critic ignores the temporal element crucial to an understanding of justification: the basic beliefs in the system, the ones for which we can offer no inferential justification, are justified—and thereby fit to serve a justificatory role—because they themselves have withstood the test of time and evidence, because these beliefs are the product of epistemic evolution, because the system has been allowed to evolve over time. A system that became immune to revision would before long cease to be justified. The system, then, is rational, not because of its structure at time t, but because no belief in the system has always been *de jure* immune to revision.

Let me put this point another way: having made a judgment, you may go on to justify the judgment, but this justification will, of course, rest on "assumed background of believed theory," as Sklar put it. One might, if the dialectical situation requires it, go on to justify some or all of these assumed background beliefs; but of course, such a justification will itself rely on an assumed background of theory. You might suppose that at some point, we will reach a set of beliefs that we cannot justify; there are no beliefs more basic than these that we could use to justify these "foundational" beliefs. As Wittgenstein says, at some point "I have exhausted the justification, I have reached bedrock and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say, 'This is simply what I do.'"[12] Does that mean these "bedrock" beliefs are arational? No;[13] to think so is to think that a belief is only justified if we can present an explicit, inferential justification for that belief. *Some* beliefs are justified that way, but our "foundational" beliefs are justified for a different reason: they are justified because they are the result of a millennia-long inquiry of the world, because they are the

product of epistemic evolution. It follows that if we were to declare a set of basic beliefs *de jure* unrevisable, then in short order these beliefs (and all that they support) would cease to be justified. The reason is that justification for our basic beliefs relies in large part on their having faced the tribunal of inquiry and survived, and declaring a set of basic beliefs *de jure* unrevisable is to remove them from before this tribunal.[14,15] But if we haven't treated our background beliefs as *de jure* unrevisable,[16] then our system of beliefs is justified. Thus, although many philosophers (including Wittgenstein) have argued that justification requires foundations, the correct view is that *justification requires revisability*. It is only because of their historical revisability that our so-called "foundations" (the basic propositions) are justified.

One might object that some basic beliefs, such as logical beliefs, haven't been revisable, but are nevertheless justified. There are two ways of thinking about this issue. One way (which I take to be Wittgenstein's view) is that such beliefs haven't been revisable, and therefore aren't justified—but these beliefs form the framework of our language, the framework within which justification takes place. The other way of thinking about this issue is more Quinean: such beliefs may never be revised, but what makes them justified is that they have been open to revision. If a belief (such as a belief in the law of the excluded middle) has been open to revision for centuries, but so far no compelling reason has risen to revise it, then the belief has earned its epistemic status in virtue of having survived this centuries-long test. Thus, justification doesn't necessarily require that the belief is the product of revision; justification requires only that all of our basic beliefs must have been subject to revision, as a condition of their being justified. As Mark Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne put the point,

> *Treating a whole bunch of claims as de jure unchallengeable … seems …constitutive of dogmatism…Meanwhile, the recognition that some claims may turn out to be de facto unchallengeable (and even necessarily so) runs no similar cognitive risks.*[17]

It should be clear that this paper adopts the latter Quinean approach. The reason it is not dogmatic to judge by our framework propositions is that these framework propositions (not just laws of logic, but more malleable framework propositions, such as the belief that no human has ever set foot on Mars) have not been immune to revision.

Despite the defense offered above, one might nevertheless think that the present account suffers from a kind of dogmatism. The objection goes as follows:

> *You say our background beliefs are justified because they derive from a history of revision. But any history will start with arbitrarily chosen beliefs. Our current beliefs are determined by an arbitrary initial choice, and there is no reason to prefer one choice to another. So our current background beliefs are arbitrary, and holding them is dogmatic.*[18]

This objection overstates the influence of our starting place on our current theory. It is plausible to think that our current theory depends more on the revisionary pressures our theories have encountered over the years rather than on our starting place in the distant past. Consider an analogy from evolution. Richard Dawkins writes that "eyes have evolved no fewer than forty times, and probably more than sixty times, independently in various parts of the animal kingdom."[19] So similar environmental inputs led various lineages to develop the same feature. Now it may be pointed out that all of these different lineages have a common descent, but it is not their common descent which explains their common evolution of the eye. Rather, similar environmental and evolutionary pressures caused the eye to evolve again and again; common descent plays little or no role in the explanation of this. Plausibly, the same applies to the evolution of our belief systems over time. Consider the situation of different communities characterized by different theoretical starting points. As long as they experience epistemic evolution characterized by progress (which we will endeavor to define in the following few paragraphs), the fact that these communities have different starting points will be less important than the fact that they live in the same world and are hence subject to the same

causal influences and pressures on their scientific theories. Just as external pressures proved more important than starting place in the case of evolution, so will external epistemic pressures prove more important than starting place in the evolution of our theories.

So far, we have used an evolutionary analogy to discuss the type of change our theories undergo over the generations. If researchers allow themselves to be guided by goals such as a desire to reach the truth, it seems likely that epistemic evolution will result in progress. As Karl Popper writes,

> *What characterizes the empirical method is its manner of exposing to falsification, in every conceivable way, the system to be tested. Its aim is not to save the lives of untenable systems but, on the contrary, to select the one which is by comparison the fittest, by exposing them all to the fiercest struggle for survival.*[20]

In a locus classicus of evolutionary epistemology, Donald Campbell writes that "a blind-varation-and-selective-retention process is fundamental to all inductive achievements, to all genuine increases in knowledge, to all increases in fit of system to environment."[21]

It is important to note that the change that confers justification on basic beliefs must be a certain sort of change. We have talked about the importance of epistemic evolution in the justification of our background beliefs. But presumably, not all change is positive, and hence not all change is justification-conferring. What is needed is that we revise our background theories in a way that fits experience. That is, what is needed is not just change, but *progress*. But of course, not all researchers are guided by such pure motives, and one might worry, then, that not all theory change represents progress toward better fit between theory and environment. Thus, it is necessary to have some tool in hand for distinguishing progress from mere change (or even regress). Such a tool has been developed by Philip Kitcher in *The Advancement of Science*. Kitcher notes that progress is not one-dimensional; rather, there are different types of progress, which Kitcher identifies as follows. First is practical progress, which is an increase in our ability to control the world. Then there are varieties of cognitive progress. First is conceptual progress, which Kitcher defines as follows:

> *Conceptual progress is made when we adjust the boundaries of our categories to conform to kinds and when we are able to provide more adequate specifications of our referents. Striking examples come from the history of all sciences: 'planet,' 'electrical attraction,' 'molecule,' 'acid,' 'gene,' 'homology,' 'Down's syndrome,' are all terms for which faulty modes of reference have been improved.*[22]

Another type of cognitive progress is explanatory progress. Kitcher writes that

> *Explanatory progress consists in improving our view of the dependencies of phenomena. Scientists typically recognize some phenomena as prior, others as dependent. For example, ever since Dalton, chemists have regarded molecular arrangements and rearrangements as prior to the macroscopic phenomena of chemical reactions, and, since the 1960s, geologists have viewed interactions among plates as prior to facts about mountain building and earthquakes.*[23]

Given these specific varieties of progress, Kitcher defines progressive change in a practice as follows:

> *…let us say that the sequence of practices P1,…, Pn is broadly progressive just in case for every pair of adjacent members there is a component of practice with respect to which the change from the earlier to the later is progressive and the change from P1 to Pn is progressive with respect to every component of practice.*[24]

Kitcher argues that science in general does progress, and outlines in chapter 6 the conditions (which he thinks normally obtain) under which science advances. Thus, using tools of the sort supplied by Kitcher, we can define the sort of progressive change which confers justification on our background theories.

Before moving on to draw some intermediate

conclusions from the above discussion, let me pause to make some comments about the epistemic values that are at work here. In keeping with the evolutionary analogy, the primary notion we are working with is one of fit: beliefs that do not fit with their environment are discarded and replaced with those that do fit. But a creature's environment has two elements: first, there are the physical, non-living elements of the environment. Second, there are other organisms. Both of these environmental features create pressures on a particular creature; and to survive, a creature must exhibit fitness with respect to both elements of its environment. The analogy can be applied, with only a little strain, to the evolutionary view of epistemology under discussion here: evolutionary forces work through conflicts with inputs from the physical world as well as with other beliefs ('creatures'). Conflict with either environmental feature can cause a belief to 'die out' and be replaced by a fitter specimen. And thus, we see that the emphasis on fitness makes coherence with other beliefs and coherence with empirical inputs to be important considerations.

There are two reasons, however, for regarding environmental inputs as in an important sense prior to coherence with other beliefs. First, incoherence is most often introduced into a belief system through observation: observation introduces a new belief into the system which creates incoherence, and thus a 'struggle for survival' among the beliefs present in the system. The exponential growth of knowledge over the past centuries has mostly been the growth of empirical knowledge—this is the primary source of new inputs into the system, and so will understandably be the source of most of the inconsistencies. Ideally, the inconsistency will then be reconciled by the familiar considerations of simplicity and so forth.

The second reason for the emphasis on observation and experience relates to the issue discussed above: namely, some beliefs are not revised, and are yet justified. As I indicated above, such beliefs are justified because they have survived so long without needing revision. But for their survival to be epistemically meaningful, they must have survived constant testing. As we noted above, the most torrential source of new information in our system is observation; it is observation that will be placing the most evolutionary pressures on a given belief. If this flow of new information, and the exponential increase in knowledge that we have become accustomed to, does not dislodge a particular belief, then this is a powerful argument that the belief is true: it has survived such a long and severe test at the hands of ever-increasing empirical data.

Some intermediate conclusions

We are now in a position to draw some important conclusions.

(1) Conservatism is an unavoidable part of justification. As Sklar and Wittgenstein recognize, all inferential justification takes place against a background of beliefs which the individual is not capable of justifying. There are certain principles we must merely accept.

(2) This conservatism is not anti-epistemic, because of the diachronic nature of justification.[25] We are led to the following, interesting conclusion: *our basic beliefs' justification is essentially diachronic, and their justification requires revisability*. If these requirements are not met—if a system of basic beliefs is not revisable—then our conservatism becomes mere dogmatism. Our system of background beliefs becomes unjustified (since evolutionary forces are not allowed to work on them); we are no longer epistemically justified in ruling out remote hypotheses (since this practice depends on having a justified background theory, and the justification of this background theory can only be understood in terms of revisability and diachronic evolution). Justification has an essentially diachronic element. We will come back to this point in a few pages, to clear up any potential misunderstandings that might arise.

(3) The type of conservatism that is defended here is very different from the version of conservatism discussed by most commentators. Most commentators are concerned with the version of conservatism that says, roughly, that a belief acquires some degree of justification merely by being believed.[26] But this simple version of the principle is almost certainly false. Rather, the principle of conservatism applies only to certain propositions, propositions we will call *basic beliefs*. Further, which propositions fit this category is determined by the diachronic progress of our particular social practice. Finally, such beliefs are

justified by their history, rather than by other sorts of reasons we might adduce in support of them. (We will discuss this last point in the following paragraphs). Let us further explain and define the version of conservatism defended here.

(a) Basic beliefs are propositions that are so basic that we find it difficult, if not impossible, to provide any sort of inferential justification for them. Propositions that might fit into this category include "Most humans have two hands;" "The sky is usually blue;" "The earth is not at the center of the universe;" "Demons do not interfere with scientific experiments;" and so on. If asked to provide an inferential justification for such a belief, we might find ourselves unsure of what to say. In many cases, we simply don't know how to go about inferentially justifying these beliefs; they simply seem too basic. Another type of case is illustrated by one of Wittgenstein's famous examples: "My not having been on the moon is as sure a thing for me as any grounds I could give for it."[27] I could provide an inferential justification for the claim, "I have two hands" or "I have never been on the moon," but it is pointless to do so, as the considerations I would cite as support are not more basic than the claim they are supposed to support.

(b) These basic beliefs are justified by the diachronic progress of our process of inquiry. Even though the average person cannot provide an inferential justification for such beliefs, these beliefs are (as I argued earlier) justified by the fact that they are the product of centuries of epistemic evolution, and have so far withstood the challenges which are part of the progress of knowledge and the exponential increase in knowledge and information which accompanies such progress. Thus, the difference between a basic belief and an inferential belief is that a basic belief needs no justification beyond its history, whereas an inferentially justified belief is one that is ultimately justified on the basis of some basic beliefs.[28]

c) A third feature of basic beliefs follows from other features of basic beliefs, namely, that basic beliefs are justified, and yet we cannot provide any (inferential or non-inferential justification) for them. It follows from this that when a basic belief is challenged, the burden of proof is on the challenger to defend his or her position. The holder of the basic belief cannot be expected to defend his belief (since part of the definition of 'basic belief' is that such a defense is not possible), and yet the belief is justified all the same; and so a challenger to this belief must herself shoulder the burden of proof. If the challenger can not give us evidence suggesting that the proposition in question is false, then we are justified in continuing to believe that the proposition is true. Indeed, it virtually follows from any definition of conservatism that the burden of proof is on the challenger: the holder of the basic belief is prima facie entitled to this belief, and so it is up to the challenger to demonstrate that this entitlement does not hold. This feature of conservatism (that the burden of proof is on the one who wishes to revise the basic belief) will become important when we turn our discussion to the issue of radical skepticism.

(d) To say that basic beliefs are prima facie justified in no way entails that they are immune from revision. Consider an example of a basic belief offered by Wittgenstein: "No one has ever been on the moon." Wittgenstein writes,

> *What we believe depends on what we learn. We all believe that it isn't possible to get to the moon; but there might be people who believe that that is possible and that it sometimes happens. We say: these people do not know a lot that we know. And, let them be never so sure of their belief - they are wrong and we know it. If we compare our system of knowledge with theirs then theirs is evidently the poorer one by far.*[29]

And yet someone who now denied that humans had ever set foot on the moon would be dismissed as ignorant or crazy. And so basic propositions are revisable. With the basic proposition of no one having ever been on the moon, the process of revision was speedy, as the event was televised. But with other basic beliefs (such as the belief that the earth is at the center of the universe), conservatism will often entail that their revision will be a lengthy (and sometimes painful) process. And indeed, as I argued above, such basic beliefs must be revisable; it is their revisability which is ultimately the source of their rationality.

(e) It is important to emphasize the sense in which what I am calling conservatism here really is

a version of conservatism. From one perspective, it isn't conservatism at all: the basic propositions are justified not merely because they are believed by us, but because they are the process of a millennia-long process of empirical inquiry. That is, they are justified by their *history*. So there is something justifying these basic propositions, something beyond the mere fact that they are believed by us. So from a sort of external view, taking our theory of the world as our object of study, conservatism is not conservatism at all. However, from the perspective of individual agents, the basic propositions are conservatively held.[30] Most agents are not capable of telling a story about what justifies these basic propositions; they hold them (and are entitled to hold them) for reasons that are conservative in nature. They represent a starting point from which the individual can reason.[31] Thus, conservatism really is conservatism—at least from the perspective of the individual.

(4) Our final intermediate conclusion is that justification is social in character, in that it presupposes a community with a history of inquiry, with the results of this inquiry (and the evolving epistemic background governing this inquiry) passed down through generations of inquirers. Remember the course of our epistemic argument for the justification of basic beliefs: our so-called basic beliefs are justified by the generations-long history of inquiry which produced them. The argument is this: certain beliefs (such as a belief that demons don't interfere with scientific experiments) are justified because they have endured generations of inquiry, practiced by countless researchers, and they have survived this history without refutation. That our basic beliefs survived so long, without becoming encumbered by ad hoc epicycles, open to revision and refutation but not having succumbed, is what lends epistemic weight to our background theory. Thus, justification is social in that local justification requires that our basic beliefs are justified, and these basic beliefs have their justification in the history of inquiry which has produced them. As this history spreads over generations and countless inquirers, there is a social dimension to justification. I will return to this point in a moment, when addressing objections, but the key thing to note is that this history is crucial to the justification of our basic beliefs; a community lacking such a history would have theories built on sand, lacking justification.

Before moving on, I want to clear up one potential misunderstanding. I am only attempting to establish that revision and diachronicity are crucial to the justification of *basic beliefs*—those beliefs which are conservatively held. As I noted earlier in the paper, some beliefs are inferentially justified, and others seem to defy such inferential justification. It is the latter beliefs whose justification essentially relies on their place in our history of inquiry, whose justification is essentially diachronic and essentially relies on openness to revision. The former are inferentially justified, and so their justification need not rely on the conservatism defended above. Thus, when explaining how an ordinary belief (such as "Pelé lead Brazil to three World Cup victories") is justified, we will appeal not to conservatism, diachronicity and revision, but instead to memory, authority, or some other recognized justifier.[32] The justification of such beliefs might ultimately trace back to the justification of our basic beliefs, and so the justification of ordinary belief-claims might ultimately rely on revision, etc. But this would only show that a belief such as "Pelé lead Brazil to three World Cup victories" indirectly relies on revision and diachronicity (in the same way that a foundationalist would say that an inferentially-justified belief indirectly relies on some foundational belief); it is not directly justified by such considerations.

Objections and Replies

Let us now turn our attention to answering some objections. First, one might object as follows: "An appeal to revisability and the long history of human inquiry cannot be part of an argument vindicating those theories, because the appeal makes use of those theories. Therefore, the argument is circular."[33] This objection fails, because I am not trying to justify those theories constituting the history of inquiry. I am trying to justify the current theory of the world, held by an epistemic community. *That* theory is justified because the previous theories led, through a more or less objective process of inquiry, to the current theory. The current theory represents the culmination of centuries of inquiry,

and its authority rests on the process that led up to it. The current theory isn't justified by itself; it is justified by the history that preceded it.

Of course, this is not to say that those previous theories weren't justified in their time. They were, and for similar reasons: they were justified by the history of inquiry that preceded them. At any time, the theory justified at that time owes its justification to what went before. This is part of what it means to say that epistemic justification is diachronic.

There seem to be, however, several classes of counterexamples to the theory of justification developed here. Consider the following:

- A community that springs into existence (say, Adam and Eve) presumably have justified beliefs, even though there is no history of inquiry in this community. (For future reference, we will call this community the Ruritanians.)
- Beliefs about goblins, etc., are not justified, even though they may be part of the fundamental assumptions in a community with a long history of inquiry.
- A victim of an evil demon is justified in her beliefs, even though she is part of no such history.

Initially, these seem like daunting counterexamples. However, I think they can be defused. These examples exploit internalist intuitions. I will argue that the diachronic requirement defended in this paper serves as a quasi-externalist criterion, and will argue that we must see our beliefs as subject to evaluation by such criteria.

The importance of recognizing an external constraint such as the presence of a diachronic history can be shown by the following train of thought. Traditional theories of epistemology have placed certain *structural* constraints on a person's belief system. For foundationalism, beliefs in the system are only justified if they stand in the proper inferential relation to various foundational beliefs. For coherentism, beliefs are only justified to the extent that they belong to a belief system which is itself coherent. But notice that these structural features cannot be internalist constraints on belief, for the simple fact that it is impossible for an individual to ascertain whether these constraints are met. Internalist constraints can only demand of the agent things which can be reasonably expected of human cognizers. Well, what can be reasonably expected of humans, epistemically speaking? We can't expect them to calculate conditional probabilities for all their beliefs and have a belief set that conforms to Bayesian axioms. Perhaps it would be ideal if they could—but it would also perhaps be *ideal* if humans could withstand any amount of torture without betraying their principles and ideals. What would be ideal is not relevant to what counts as good *in the actual world, given our actual abilities*.[34] Can humans be expected to have a belief system that satisfies coherentist constraints? Probably not; our belief systems are massive things, and examination of whether the system is coherent or not can only proceed piecemeal.

One might reply to this by saying, "So much the worse for structural constraints on belief." But clearly there is a sense in which (for example) a coherent belief system is, *ceteris paribus*, rationally superior to an incoherent one. Suppose a person possess a belief system which is riven with inconsistencies, ad hoc epicycles and beliefs, and so forth. This system is clearly rationally inferior to a system which is coherent. But this superiority is not something that can simply be seen or detected by normal human cognizers; and so coherence must function in this case as a quasi-externalist constraint. And this is the sense in which the diachronic requirement functions in the alleged counterexamples to the current theory.

Other authors have argued that our evaluation of epistemic agents must be relativized to agents' actual abilities. For example, Alvin Goldman writes,

> *Advice in matters intellectual, as in other matters, should take account of the agent's capacities. There is no point in recommending procedures that cognizers cannot follow or prescribing results that cognizers cannot attain. As in the ethical sphere, 'ought' implies 'can'.*[35]

And so if we are evaluating individual performance or blameworthiness (as an internalist can be taken to do), then we must take into account the actual epistemic abilities of agents. Thus, requirements that transcend such abilities must be regarded as structural, externalist standards, not

personal, internalist standards.

This distinction allows us to answer some of the above objections. The belief system of the Ruritanians is flawed because it fails to satisfy a rather externalist requirement, one that is not obviously recognizable from the internal perspective. The victim of the evil demon has a similarly flawed belief system, although again, this flaw is not one that is recognizable from the internalist perspective. The goblin case is a bit trickier. As I argued above, the history of epistemic inquiry in a community must be characterized in part, at least, by some degree of responsible revisability. If, for example, beliefs about goblins have been treated for some time as *de jure* unrevisable in the community in question, then these beliefs are not rationally held. But if the community has been responsible in revising its beliefs, and belief in goblins has (so far) survived, then why not say that these beliefs are rational? There is no reason, in principle, why a false belief cannot be rationally-held; to deny this is to conflate truth and justification. Just as in our community it was no doubt rational to believe in caloric or phlogiston, this community is entitled to its belief in goblins. So for this last example, we must recognize that having a long history of inquiry is a necessary but not sufficient condition for justification: the way in which this history went, and the way in which the community went about revising its commitments in order to reach its current point, are relevant too. But at the risk of conflating justification and truth, we must recognize that there are cases where this history can go correctly, yet still result in some false (yet justified) beliefs.

No doubt many readers will feel some dissatisfaction at this solution; they will want to insist that there is a sense in which the Ruritanians (and the victim of the evil demon) are justified in their beliefs. To insist on this is to insist on the applicability of internalist standards of justification to the cases in question. There is no reason to disagree with this insistence, unless you somehow think that a cognizer cannot be evaluated according to both internalist and externalist criteria. But why think this? Indeed, I think there is a way to satisfy both internalist intuitions and the conclusion that belief is answerable to externalist constraints. The way to achieve this reconciliation is to recognize that there are two types of justification attribution one might make. Consider the following sentence:

> *C: Astrology as a system has been soundly refuted, but given her upbringing and available evidence, she is perfectly justified in believing in astrology.*[36]

Notice that both clauses in this sentence make epistemic claims, and that there is a sense in which these claims oppose each other. Let us briefly examine these two types of claims.

The claim expressed by the second clause of C expresses what we shall call *subjective* (or *personal*) justification. In evaluating an agent's subjective justification, we are evaluating the agent's performance and beliefs. We ask whether the agent performed well, epistemically, given the evidence and epistemic resources available to her. Thus, subjective justification is internalist in spirit. But remember, as we argued above, internalist constraints can only demand of the agent things which can be reasonably expected of human cognizers, and human cognizers cannot reasonably be expected to evaluate their community's epistemic history, the structural features of their theory, and so forth. Thus, in addition to subjective justification, we must also recognize the relevance of *objective* justification attributions, which is the sort of claim made by the first clause of C. With objective justification attributions, one takes an externalist or third-person view, with a view of features of justification to which individual performance cannot be held accountable (including structural and historical features of the individual's and community's belief system). As a more externalist standard of justification, the diachronicity requirement belongs to objective justification.

An agent can be subjectively justified without being objectively justified. That is, an agent can have performed well, epistemically (or, if you believe in epistemic responsibility, can be epistemically free of blame) even if an external observer can see that the belief or theory the agent holds as a result of this performance is not the best justified one, or that it has structural flaws, etc.[37] That is to say, an agent can be subjectively justified without her theory being objectively justified. In C above, we are saying that she has not performed badly relative to her epistemic

circumstances, but that her theory is not objectively justified: perhaps there is evidence available in her community, not widely disseminated (so she is not held accountable for failing to obtain it), that astrology is false; or perhaps the history of astrological inquiry in her community has not been characterized by sufficient openness to refutation, or so on.[38] Alvin Goldman makes the following comment on this case: we are inclined to say that there is a sense in which she is justified because of "the cultural plight of our believer…Our believer has good reasons to trust his cultural peers on many matters, and lacks decisive reasons for distrusting their confidence in astrology."[39] On the other hand, there is a sense in which we want to say this person's belief, which results from reading zodiacal signs, is not justified because the method of astrology "looks improper and inadequate."[40] Thus, in the same case, a belief can be justified in one sense, but not in another.

So there is a simple answer to how we reconcile internalist and externalist constraints. Consider the first example, of a community that is created *ex nihilo*, with a ready set of beliefs about the world. We can admit, for example, that the Ruritanians are subjectively justified in their beliefs—they satisfy relevant internalist constraints. But they lack objective justification because they fail to satisfy the relevant diachronicity constraint.

This brief account gives the rough idea of the solution considered here, but there are complications, depending on how the Ruritanians came to hold their beliefs in the first place. Let us examine the case in more detail. As I noted in the previous paragraph, it is perhaps true that the Ruritanians are subjectively justified in forming beliefs about the world, and perhaps in maintaining the beliefs they already have.[41] To put things in terms of a deontic conception of subjective justification, the Ruritanians are not epistemically to be blamed for believing as they do. But when we shift perspectives, and view the situation through the lens of objective justification, matters are different. It depends, first, on how the Ruritanians acquired their beliefs. Suppose Ruritania was created by a race of super-beings, who gave the new community many of the beliefs that the race of super-beings themselves held. In this case, the Ruritanians might well be objectively justified—but the objective justification of their beliefs is parasitic on the objective justification of the beliefs of the race of super-beings. Because the super-beings' beliefs are objectively justified (because of their history of inquiry), the Ruritanians beliefs are also justified, since the super-beings endowed the new creatures with these same beliefs. But suppose, in the creation of Ruritania, there was no conscious or intelligent control over the beliefs of the new community. It is not clear why we should attribute objective justification to the Ruritanians. If the new beliefs of the Ruritanians were formed not via intelligent control, but by some non-intelligent process (due to some feature of the *ex nihilo* formation process, the Ruritanians just happened to wind up with this set of beliefs), then it is not clear at all why we should say that these beliefs are objectively justified. Again, the Ruritanians may be subjectively justified—no blame accrues to them for believing as they do—but the beliefs they have are not worthy of epistemic respect, as there is no particular reason to suppose the process by which these creatures were endowed with this particular set of beliefs would give them any true beliefs at all. (I suppose it is open to one to argue that a community of sentient, sapient believers could come into existence, *ex nihilo*, with a set of beliefs, and the process of belief-endowment, though not controlled by any intelligent force, somehow guarantees that the beliefs are true, and that the beliefs of this community are therefore objectively justified. But actually, on second thought, it is not really open to someone to argue this absurd position.)

In any case, it is not clear what relevance science-fiction examples like this one have to our actual conception of justification. If our epistemic circumstances were radically different than they are, then perhaps a different conception of justification would be appropriate. Perhaps, for example, the Ruritanians would at first be entitled only to claim a very weak type of justification (similar, say, to a notion of permission: they are permitted to believe as they do, but not justified in a strong sense). As the community develops, and acquires a history of inquiry, only then do they become entitled to claim for themselves (or are we entitled to attribute to them) a stronger notion of justification. Thus, I am not forced to concede that the first counterexample is a threat to the theory of justification developed in this paper.

Let us consider the second alleged counterexample, the community in which belief in (say) goblins forms part of the fundamental assumptions of the community. First, we must ask about the epistemic evolution of the community. As I noted above, the history of epistemic inquiry in the community must be characterized in part, at least, by some degree of responsible revisability. Thus, if beliefs about goblins have long been *de jure* unrevisable in the community in question, then in fact these beliefs are not objectively justified (although again, the members of the community may be subjectively justified in believing in goblins).

But suppose the epistemic history of this community meets these constraints, and thus the community is somehow "entitled" to its belief in goblins. One might then be able to say that at this particular stage in the community's epistemic evolution, belief in goblins is objectively justified. Of course, future developments might cause the community to quit believing in goblins, but in the meantime, their belief is objectively justified—just as our epistemic community might previously have been objectively justified in believing in caloric or phlogiston.

By now, the response to the final counterexample (the victim of the evil demon) should be clear. The victim is subjectively justified in her beliefs—she hasn't gone wrong in thinking there is an external world, etc., given the evidence at her disposal—but her beliefs are not objectively justified. In this way, the final counterexample can also be defused.

One interesting consequence of an insistence on the relevance of the internalist perspective is that it gives us more reasons in favor of conservatism and the importance of revision. Consider conservatism first: when one is trained into a set of beliefs (as a child, or as a novice scientist or philosopher, etc.), one is given a starting point that is (from the perspective of the child or novice scientist) entirely arbitrary.[42] We do not choose which theory of the world we are dogmatically trained into as children; this is beyond our control. Thus, one's epistemic performance cannot be judged by the theory one holds initially; rather, the theory one is trained into is one of the *circumstances* to which epistemic evaluation is relativized. One's epistemic performance cannot be judged by the theory one holds because, as I argued earlier, humans are not capable of evaluating their belief systems *tout court*. One is forced to take one's belief system as a given, and revise it piecemeal. Thus, consideration of our epistemic capacities (and of the fact that internalist justification must be relative to what is humanly possible) supports conservatism: one's epistemic performance cannot be faulted on the grounds that one cannot evaluate (and then accept or reject) one's entire belief system *tout court*. One must accept one's belief system as given—one must accept it conservatively—and use this system as the basis for further revisions.

This emphasis on conservatism in turn supports giving revision an important role in internalist epistemic evaluation. Since each of us is given a more or less arbitrary starting place, it seems contrary to the spirit of internalism to evaluate a person's epistemic performance based on his or her starting place. After all, we do not choose which theory of the world we are dogmatically trained into as children; this is beyond our control (and hence, we are not to be epistemically praised or blamed for holding this system). Similarly, as we noted in our discussion of Kuhn, an aspiring scientist being trained into the currently-held scientific theory doesn't have the knowledge to evaluate whether this theory is correct or not; only once the scientist has been trained into the theory and given its epistemic resources can the scientist then go about trying to prove, disprove, or revise the theory. We must merely accept an arbitrary starting place, and then use that starting place as a platform for revising our theory, always using (subject to *their* revision) the tools that are initially given to us by this starting place. This strongly suggests that our evaluation of a person's epistemic performance should depend not so much on the person's starting place (and whether one has evidence for one's "starting theory"), but rather on how one revises one's beliefs over time in light of new evidence and so forth. So it is not epistemically irresponsible or unsound to hold a belief for which one has no evidence (we cannot help but do that, since we are simply dogmatically trained into a particular practice); rather, it is epistemically unsound for an agent to revise her theory without being directed by evidence, or failing to revise the theory in

the face of new evidence.[43] Thus, it seems that conservatism is supported both as an internal and an external constraint on justification.

Summary and Conclusion

To sum up, we have seen that conservatism is an unavoidable part of justification. However, the conservatism defended in this paper is different from most versions of conservatism detailed in the literature. The chief difference is that it only applies to a certain category of beliefs, those we have characterized as basic beliefs. Further, this conservatism is not dogmatic, as these basic beliefs are justified by the diachronic progress of our epistemic inquiry. Finally, in response to a set of potential counterexamples, we saw that the diachronic requirement on justification served as an external constraint, which can be viewed as supplementing a variety of familiar internalist considerations.

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Notes

[1] Sklar (1975), p. 375.
[2] Sklar (1975), p. 396.
[3] Sklar (1975), pp. 396-7.
[4] Wittgenstein (1969), §94.
[5] See, e.g, *On Certainty*, §110.
[6] *On Certainty*, §98: "the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing."
[7] Sellars 1956, §38.
[8] The importance of revisability has been advocated not just by Sellars (1956), but also by Levi (1991), Brandom (1997), Lance and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1997) and others.
[9] *On Certainty*, §94
[10] This account is not intended as an exposition of Wittgenstein. I am arguing that our basic beliefs are rational; Wittgenstein, on the other hand, held them to be neither rational nor irrational.
[11] The evolutionary analogy will go only so far—after all, evolution does not approach any goal, whereas our empirical inquiry has the goal of knowledge and explanation of the world. Many have taken evolutionary analogies like this more literally, and used this as fodder for instrumentalism in the philosophy of science. Discussion of this aspect of the realism/antirealism debate would, however, take us too far afield.
[12] Wittgenstein (1958), §217.
[13] Again, Wittgenstein thinks these foundational beliefs are arational and not justified, but I think he is mistaken (for reasons we are now exploring).
[14] This is why Mill (1978) writes that we can only know we are right because we allow free inquiry. In *On Liberty*, he writes, "There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation. Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justified us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right" (18).

If we don't allow challenges to orthodoxy, then orthodoxy ceases to be rational. It is only rational as long as it is before the tribunal of experience; when a belief is given permanent reprieve from challenges, then it ceases to be justified.

[15] If a system became immune to challenge and revision, individuals subscribing to that system might be perfectly well justified in continuing to have the beliefs dictated by the system in question, and thinking that the system is rational. But the system itself ceases to be rational. We will discuss this further later in the paper.

[16] Actually, the accuracy of this statement depends on the scope of the 'we.' Fideists treat belief in God as *de jure* unrevisable; for the Catholic Church, certain moral teachings are *de jure* unrevisable. For this reason, such fideists and Catholics are not justified in holding these beliefs.

[17] Lance and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1997), p. 120.

[18] This objection was raised by an anonymous associate editor for *Episteme*.

[19] Dawkins (1996), p. 139.

[20] Popper (1959), p. 41. Quoted in Campbell (1974), p. 415.

[21] Campbell (1974), p. 421.

[22] Kitcher (1993), pp. 95-6.

[23] Kitcher (1993), p. 105.

[24] Kitcher (1993), p. 92, italics in original.

[25] Some philosophers have argued, though, that conservatism is supported by pragmatic reasons. Kuhn (1959) argues that conservatism speeds the progress of science. If these philosophers are right, then conservatism is supported by both pragmatic and epistemic principles. I will not deny this, but I will insist that conservatism is at least supported by the latter type of reasons.

[26] See, for example, Goldstick (1971) ["…independently of any such empirical grounds the bare fact that some proposition has been believed by us up to the present should be a consideration in its favor" (p. 186)]; Goldstick (1976); Foley (1982) ["… a proposition acquires a favorable epistemic status for a person simply by being believed by him" (p. 165)]; Christensen (1994) ["…an agent is in some measure justified in maintaining a belief simply in virtue of the fact that the agent has that belief" (p. 69)]; Adler (1996) ["…believing that *p* is a reason for belief or continued belief that *p*" (p. 80)]. The above quotes merely represent the authors' characterization of epistemic conservatism; most of the authors cited in fact reject conservatism as an epistemic principle. Harman (1986) is one philosopher who supports the principle of conservatism, however.

[27] Wittgenstein (1969), §111.

[28] An associate editor for *Episteme* helped in the formulation of this point.

[29] *On Certainty*, §286.

[30] I will discuss these two different perspectives on epistemic justification later in the paper.

[31] I argue at the end of the paper that given the fact that an individual cannot evaluate the rationality of these basic propositions, we should judge individual rationality not on the basis of the *structure* of an individual's set of beliefs, but instead based on how the agent *revises* his or her beliefs.

[32] Some have argued that revision is crucial to all beliefs, not just basic ones. Mark Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne write, "A practice could in effect adopt the positivist proposal of treating a whole bunch of claims as *de jure* unchallengeable…But we would not be tempted to adopt such a practice ourselves. Such a practice seems to encourage—even be constitutive of—dogmatism, preclude dialogue, induce cognitive sterility, and all at no obvious gain" (1997, p. 120). I will not pursue this issue here, but will instead confine my argument to the importance of revisability for basic beliefs.

[33] I owe this objection to an anonymous referee.

[34] Lance (2000) addresses some of these issues. Bayesians often claim that their account is offered as a regulative ideal, and that an agent is not necessarily irrational for failing to adhere to

Bayesian constraints. But this is just an admission that Bayesianism does not offer a complete theory of rationality, and must be supplemented with something else.

[35] Goldman (1978), p. 510. Goldman (1986, pp. 279-283) argues further that standards of individual rationality should not be tied to what an 'ideally logical being' is capable of.

[36] A similar example, illustrating a similar distinction between different types of justification, is offered in Goldman (1988).

[37] Other philosophers have also distinguished between different types of justification. Audi (1993) distinguishes between personal and impersonal justification; Engel (1992) also argues that there are two different types of justification, corresponding to internalism and externalism. These distinctions are somewhat different from the one I am drawing here.

[38] This distinction between subjective and objective justification is very similar to Goldman's (1988) distinction between weak and strong justification.

[39] Goldman (1988), p. 52.

[40] Goldman (1988), p. 52.

[41] I am not entirely sure this is the case. If the reflective members of the community are aware that they recently came into existence, and were created with these beliefs, they might question the source of their beliefs about the world and come, legitimately, to doubt them.

[42] See Kuhn (1959).

[43] Although Kuhn has pointed out (1959, 1970) that we should not be too quick to revise our theories in the light of evidence that conflicts with our theory.

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