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A Better Disjunctivist Response to the 'New Evil Genius' Challenge

Kegan J Shaw
University of Edinburgh

Abstract:

This paper aims for a more robust epistemological disjunctivism (ED) by offering on its behalf a new and *better* response to the 'new evil genius' problem. The first section articulates the 'new evil genius challenge' (NEG challenge) to ED, specifying its two components: the 'first-order' and 'diagnostic' problems for ED. The first-order problem challenges proponents of ED to offer some understanding of the intuition behind the thought that your radically deceived duplicate is no less justified than you are for adopting her perceptual beliefs. In the second section, I argue that *blamelessness* explanations are inadequate to the task and offer better explanations in their place—that of 'trait-level virtue' and 'reasonability'. The diagnostic problem challenges proponents of ED to explain why it is that *classical* internalists disagree with them about how to interpret new evil genius considerations. The proponent of ED owes some error theory. I engage this problem in the third section, arguing that classical internalists are misled to overlook disjunctivist interpretations of new evil genius thinking owing to a mistaken commitment to a kind of 'vindicatory' explanation of proper perceptual belief.

1 Disjunctivism and the ‘New Evil Genius’

1.1

Epistemological disjunctivism (ED) conceives of perceptual knowledge as essentially grounded in evidential support that is both factive and reflectively accessible. In at least paragon cases, when it ‘looks’ to you as if p because you are perceiving that p , you have evidence for thinking that p , which is furnished by your very *seeing that p* to be the case.¹ Since by stipulation seeing that p is *both* factive and reflectively accessible, ED is thought to represent the ‘holy grail’ of epistemology—seemingly incorporating *both* internalist and externalist insights while avoiding the pitfalls of each (Pritchard 2012, 1).

For consider that if perceptual knowledge is in virtue of epistemic support which is *reflectively accessible*, then there’s scope for the idea that knowledge involves a kind of responsible or non-negligent believing. It’s hard to make sense of the thought that one can be properly criticized for accepting a belief if the ‘good-making’ features of one’s belief are never ‘within view’ for the subject. Indeed, you might think that ED depicts perceptual knowledge as responsible believing *par excellence*, since in the best cases one accepts the belief that p for the reason that one *sees* that p . And who is more responsible in conducting one’s doxastic affairs than one who accepts some belief on the basis of a consideration that doesn’t still leave it open that what one believes might be false? Remarkably, none of this is purchased at the cost of even remotely attenuating the ‘truth-connection’ between what one believes and its epistemic support. This is because ‘seeing that p ’ is *factive*, entailing the truth of the target belief.

¹ This is the view defended by Pritchard (2011, 2012, forthcoming), McDowell (1995, 1998, 2002), and Millar (2011, 2014). There are nice distinctions between these ‘brands’ of disjunctivism. For instance, Pritchard and McDowell argue for a kind of *knowledge* epistemological disjunctivism—arguing for a view about what knowledge is (such as constituted by a perceptual belief enjoying factive rational support, furnished by one’s seeing that p). Millar, on the other hand, argues for a kind of *justification* epistemological disjunctivism—arguing for a view about what perceptual justification is. Millar thinks that while perceptual knowledge need not be constituted by any ‘believing for a reason’ relation, nevertheless such knowledge provides one with excellent reason to ‘retain’ one’s perceptual beliefs.

So ED stakes its claim to internalism by virtue of advocating for evidential support that is accessible² to the subject by simple reflection upon its situation.³

But while ‘internalist’ in this respect, ED is not ‘traditionally’ internalist. No advocate of *classical* internalism would accept it. For classical internalism is marked by a kind of internalism about *evidence*. Evidential internalism holds that a person shares all her evidence with any non-factive mental state duplicate of hers.⁴ For example, the evidence you have now for thinking that there’s a hand in front of you is the same you would have if you were now only tricked into thinking this, because you were a brain in a vat, say.⁵ Perhaps your evidence is your ‘*seeming* to see that *p*’ or something to that effect.

But ED is defined in objection to this thesis. For so long as your evidence includes the fact that you see that *p*, you have evidence not available to every non-factive mental state duplicate of yours. For some of these folks just hallucinate all the time, merely seeming to see that *p* whenever you see that *p*. The result is that you will differ from them in the evidence you have. You won’t have the same evidence. By thus advocating for factive evidential support in ‘good cases’, ED adopts a kind of *evidential externalism*. It’s owing to its evidentially externalist element that ED qualifies as a kind of *non-classical* internalism about epistemic support.

Indeed, this evidentially externalist aspect of ED can be reconceptualised for appreciating the view’s distinctly disjunctive aspect: in cases where it perceptually

² Following Conee and Feldman (2000) we might conceive of ‘cognitive access’ as neutral between more specific forms of internalist access, such as those described by *mentalism* and *accessibilism* in epistemology. Surely by ‘reflective access’ Pritchard means to wed ED to a kind of accessibilism, as is evident in his (2011). But it remains unclear whether a mentalist rendering of ED cannot generate every advantage Pritchard argues for in (2012).

³ Although generally more enigmatic on the specifics of ED, John McDowell (2002, 280) betrays ‘internalist’ sentiments when he writes that “when one sees how things are [...] a warrant and cause for one’s belief that things are that way is visibly *there* for one in the bit of reality that is within one’s view”, and that in such cases one’s epistemic support is not external to what is “available” to one from one’s “present angle on reality”.

⁴ Silins (2005, 376) writes that evidential internalists think that “necessarily, if A and B are internal twins, then A and B have the same evidence”.

⁵ That’s not to say that classical internalists need think that the *support* your evidence lends in both cases is the same. For proponents of classical internalism who think it *is* the same see Conee and Feldman (2000, 2008) and Dougherty (2014). For others who think it *isn’t* see ‘evidentialist reliabilists’ like Goldman (2011), Comesaña (2010), and Alston (1988).

looks to one as if p , one's evidence for p is either that one sees that p or that one only seemingly sees that p —depending upon one's case. One's evidence in the 'good case' is thus of a better kind than what one has in the 'bad case', despite the fact that each case is introspectively indistinguishable from the other.

1.2

The 'old' evil genius problem is a problem for classical internalism—and trades on a peculiar thought the view allows, viz., that the best evidential support you ever have for your perceptual beliefs is what you would have anyway, even if you were radically deceived. The 'new' evil genius problem⁶ is a problem for certain views wishing to avoid the old problem. One such view is a kind of 'reliabilism' about justification—a belief is justified only if it's produced by some 'reliable' cognitive faculty.⁷

Since you are a thoroughly unreliable cognitive instrument in worlds that *seem* ordinary although you are a victim of an evil genius, reliabilism about justification entails that the beliefs you form in these circumstances are not justified.

But you might think it's apparent that such beliefs *are* justified. For instance, is it not apparent that, if you were radically deceived, you would have every reason you have in the actual world for holding these beliefs? This is the new evil genius problem. Applied to reliabilism about justification, the reliabilist has the problem of explaining the compelling thought that your radically deceived non-factive mental state duplicate's beliefs are no less justified than yours.

ED similarly faces a new evil genius problem.⁸ For you might have thought that the straightforward explanation why your radically deceived counterpart is no

⁶ See Cohen and Lehrer (1983).

⁷ See Goldman (1979).

⁸ I should add that the new evil genius problem is not only a problem for disjunctivists, but for any evidential externalist. Any proponent of E=K (see footnote 29) faces this problem, such as Williamson (2000) and Littlejohn (2015, forthcomingA, forthcomingB), as does someone like Schellenberg (2015); and perhaps even evidentialist reliabilists like Goldman (2011), Comesaña (2010), and Alston (1988).

less justified than you for holding her beliefs is that she has every reason you have to hold them, or she has all of your relevant evidence. You might thus be led to accept the ‘new evil genius thesis’ (NEG)⁹: that *the evidence one has in the ‘good case’ is not better than the evidence one has in the corresponding ‘bad case’*.¹⁰

ED rejects this on a matter of principle. This is because ED holds that one’s perceptual evidence is better—much better—in the good case than it is in the bad case.¹¹ After all in the good case you have available to you that you *see that p*, a bit of information incompatible with the falsity of what you believe. This is unlike a mere ‘seeming seeing’¹² that *p*, a bit of information you would have anyway even if nothing you thought about the world were true.¹³

But if ED is going to reject NEG—the idea that the evidence available to you in the bad case is just as good as the evidence you have in the good case—, then it has some explaining to do. More specifically, ED should have on offer some

⁹ In what follows I use the ‘NEG thesis’ interchangeably with ‘evidential internalism’. But in fact these notions express logically distinct ideas. Evidential internalism entails the NEG thesis, but the entailment doesn’t work in the opposite direction. For if your evidence is the same as someone else’s, it follows that your evidence can be no better (which is *not* to say that the *support* such evidence offers can be no better). But it might be true that your evidence is no better than someone else’s, even though your evidence is different (or not the same).

¹⁰ There may be some proponents of classical internalism who are unhappy about this characterization of the NEG thesis, in so far as it’s meant to reflect a commitment of theirs. In particular, some may not like its being spelled out in terms of evidence. I’ll say two things in response. First, for the purpose of this project nothing hangs on any detailed conception of evidence. Following Conee and Feldman (2008, 88), by ‘evidence’ I just mean something like ‘the information or data the person has to go on in forming her beliefs’. Secondly, though, in any case, there doesn’t appear to be any unified conception of NEG in the literature. For example, where I am choosing ‘evidence’ to describe this commitment of classical internalism, Silins (2005, 375) chooses the same; Pritchard chooses ‘internalist epistemic support’ in one place (2012, 38) and ‘rational support’ in another (forthcoming, chapter 2, 24); Turri (2009, 493) seems to be thinking of ‘reasons for belief’, and Cohen and Lehrer (1983, 192–193) in terms of justification.

¹¹ Note that it’s logically possible for subjects A and B to differ in available evidence, and yet neither is in any better evidential position than the other.

¹² ‘Seeming seeing’ is John McDowell’s label for one’s perceptual experiences when it looks to one as if *p*, but it’s not a case of *p* making itself visually manifest to one, or else it’s not a case of one’s seeing that *p*. See McDowell’s (2013) presentation at University College Dublin: “Can Cognitive Science Determine Epistemology?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8y8673RmII>.

¹³ There are no few advantages to be won if disjunctivism is true. For example Pritchard (2012) argues that disjunctivism secures a very satisfying solution to underdetermination-based radical skeptical problems; McDowell (1995) seems to argue that disjunctivism secures *against* a sort of first-person knowledge-undermining ‘reflective luck’ concerning our beliefs about the external world; and Millar (2012) has argued that disjunctivism secures for knowledge a particular role: that of clinching an answer to a particular question, or of justifying a close of inquiry.

alternative explanation for NEG-engendering intuitions. If we don't think that you and your radically deceived duplicate are equally justified because you have all the same evidence, well then why do we think this at all? Why are philosophers prone to think that a good case subject and her radically deceived counterpart share in some measure of justification or positive epistemic status if this does not amount to sameness of evidential support?

Firstly, then, ED owes some account of this situation consistent with its brand of evidential externalism—consistent with the fact that you have much better evidence than does your radically deceived counterpart. This is the *first-order* problem for ED. But then, secondly, the most robust account of ED will also provide some error theory. It will offer some diagnosis for why proponents of classical internalism are prone to adopt evidential internalism in light of new evil genius thinking, and why this is mistaken. This is the *diagnostic* problem for ED.¹⁴

The first-order problem and the diagnostic problem comprise the new evil genius challenge for epistemological disjunctivism (NEG challenge). This paper aims to offer a better disjunctivist response to the NEG challenge than any to date. The paper is divided into two further sections—each handling one aspect of the NEG challenge.

The first section tackles the first-order problem. If it's not the case that you and your radically deceived counterpart adopt your perceptual beliefs on account of the same evidence, what should the disjunctivist say about this situation so as to play fair with the NEG intuition that your radically deceived duplicate's beliefs are no less justified than yours?

The second section tackles the diagnostic problem. Why after all are epistemologists compelled to accept evidential internalism in light of new evil genius considerations and why should this compulsion be resisted? Why is the proponent of classical internalism prone to overlook disjunctivist explanations of new evil genius considerations?

¹⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me to keep clear these two distinct problems.

2 Disjunctivism and the First-order Problem

2.1

How should the disjunctivist engage the first-order problem, then? What should the disjunctivist say about your perceptual belief and that of your radically deceived counterpart so as to play fair with the thought that their belief is no less justified than yours—despite the fact that you have much better evidence?

Let us first get clear about the thought at issue in the first-order problem—the thought that compels proponents of classical internalism to adopt the NEG thesis.

In this connection Madison (2014, 66) writes that when considering a good-case subject and her radically deceived counterpart “internalists point out the intuitive plausibility of holding that the counterparts are equally justified in believing as they do: their beliefs are justified to the very same *extent*, sharing sameness of justificatory status”.

I’m going to suggest that this thought be cashed out in terms of ‘sameness of epistemic status’—rather than ‘justification’. I think Williamson (forthcoming, 3) is right that “epistemic justification is manifestly technical terminology” and that “we should be correspondingly suspicious of claims to make pre-theoretic judgments about its application.” I don’t mean to suggest that ‘epistemic status’ is any kind of natural language equivalent to ‘justification’. Rather I mean it to stand as a kind of place-holder term—indicating “*whatever it is* that is shared between your beliefs and those of your radically deceived duplicate, which drives some of us to think that both are equally justified”.¹⁵

Here is our formulation of the thought behind the new evil genius intuition: when considering a good case subject’s belief and that of her radically deceived counterpart, we are struck with the thought that both subjects are equal with respect to some grade of positive epistemic status, some normative quality relevant

¹⁵ Thanks very much to an anonymous referee for helping me to clarify this use of ‘epistemic status’.

to the aims of truth-seeking. Call this the *sameness of epistemic status* intuition (SOSI).¹⁶

From SOSI the classical internalist is instructed that the epistemic counterparts in question share in *evidential support* for their beliefs. They think that each have the very same “information to go on” in forming their beliefs, or else that this is the “best explanation” or “lesson to be drawn” from SOSI (Madison 2014, 67). In other words, they adopt NEG as the best explanation for SOSI.

But the disjunctivist cannot opt for this explanation on pains of giving up her position. ED is essentially committed to there being a radical difference between the evidence a person has in a good case and that which she has in the corresponding bad case. For in good cases one’s perceptual belief is evidentially supported by one’s seeing that *p*, despite the fact that one’s deceived counterpart’s belief is at best supported by its mere ‘seeming seeing’ that *p*.

Therefore ED must offer some alternative understanding of SOSI, one that’s consistent with the counterpart subject’s differing in evidential support. The disjunctivist might think to invoke some form of *blamelessness* for this purpose.¹⁷ I think she must do better—as I’ll argue in the next subsection.

¹⁶ You might wonder at this point whether SOSI concerns a sort of epistemic property concerning *beliefs* or *believers*. And you might further think that the answer to this question should be ‘read-off’ an articulation of SOSI itself. I think this is a mistake. Whether the epistemic properties one shares with her radically deceived counterpart are properties of herself or of her beliefs is a matter to be decided through argument and weighing of principles—not settled by appeal to brute intuition.

¹⁷ This strategy is adopted by Duncan Pritchard in his (2012, 42): “[...] epistemological disjunctivists are [not] obliged to argue that there isn’t an internalist epistemic standing which is common to both the subject and her envatted duplicate. In particular, it is widely noted about the subjects in the new evil genius example that one epistemic standing they share is that they are equally *blameless* in believing as they do.” John McDowell (2002, 99) thinks similarly. Of someone who is tricked with mirrors into thinking that there’s a candle in front of her, he writes that “it might be rational (doxastically *blameless*) for that subject—who only seems to see a candle in front of her—to claim that there is a candle in front of her [emphasis added].” Williamson (2014, 5) puts it in terms of *excuse*: “Although your belief that you have hands is fully justified, the corresponding brain in a vat’s belief is not. But the brain in a vat *has a good excuse* for believing that it has hands, because, for all it knows, its belief that it has hands is justified, since, for all it knows, it knows that it has hands. Confusion between justification and excuses undermines much talk of epistemic justification [emphasis added].”

2.2

You are strolling along the beachfront and notice a moored sailboat. You thereby come to believe that there's a ship at harbour. So does your radically deceived non-factive mental state duplicate. If it's not the fact that the two of you share the same evidence that explains the thought that there's something *epistemically* that's the same about both of your believings, then what? What explains the thought ensconced in SOSI?

Perhaps the sameness of epistemic status at issue between you and your radically deceived counterpart is that of general *blamelessness*. Your radically deceived counterpart invites no more impunity than you do, nor is any less above reproach, for believing as she does. Is this what the disjunctivist should say?

I don't think so. *General* blamelessness is unfit for what the disjunctivist needs. SOSI, after all, concerns sameness of *epistemic* status between the good case subject and her radically deceived counterpart. When considering these subjects, we are struck with the thought that the two share some positive evaluative status relevant to attaining the truth. But it's not at all clear how one's being exempt from any sort of *general* blame amounts to an *epistemic* evaluation of subjects—one relevant to the aims, say, of obtaining truth and avoiding error on a matter.

This is plausibly the reason why current advocates¹⁸ of disjunctivism (or other *knowledge-first* type views) propose *epistemic* blamelessness. They propose that your radically deceived counterpart deserves no more epistemic blame than you do for having believed as they did.

Here's a problem concerning epistemic blamelessness insofar as it's meant to shed light on SOSI. 'Blamelessness' is an inherently deontic notion—of a piece with 'obligation' and related notions of duty fulfilment. It's plausible that only if subjects are in fact bound to epistemic duties and obligations that it even makes sense to attribute to them statuses like epistemic blamelessness. But surely someone who abjured the existence of epistemic obligations or duties might still find it compelling that there's some epistemic status enjoyed in common between a subject and her radically deceived counterpart. If epistemic blamelessness was the

¹⁸ Refer to footnote 17.

status at issue in SOSI—if this is why we thought that your deceived counterpart was no less justified than you in her beliefs—then someone would have to be confused to reject epistemic obligations and nevertheless find SOSI compelling. But that just seems wrong. Surely one can think that there’s some shared epistemic status between ordinary subjects and their radically deceived counterparts without needing to commit to the existence of epistemic duties.

Moreover, recent work in this area has suggested even further reason to be suspicious about the adequacy of epistemic blamelessness for understanding the sameness of status at issue between you and your radically deceived counterpart. Following Madison (2014), we might consider comparing our radically deceived counterparts not with ourselves—but with other kinds of epistemic unfortunates.

Madison is broadly interested to defend evidentially internalist explanations of SOSI against alternative externalist explanations seeking to invoke epistemic blamelessness. But his more modest goal is to put something of a stone in the disjunctivist’s shoe. Madison argues that sameness of epistemic blamelessness is ill equipped for understanding the epistemic status that is held in common between subjects and their radically deceived counterparts. To this end Madison asks us to consider Al, Al*, Bert, and Carl.

Al and Al* are our good case and bad case counterparts respectively, who both believe there to be a ship at harbour at least because they both take themselves to see that there’s a ship at harbour. Poor Bert has been horribly brainwashed such that he also believes there to be a ship at harbour, but for unspecified reasons to do with his brainwashing. Finally Carl is your typical brain-lesion victim who believes that there’s a ship at harbour because he has smelt freshly cut grass. (The implication throughout is that only Al enjoys a true belief, but this is immaterial for Madison’s purposes).

Al: good case subject in ordinary circumstances.

Al*: bad case counterpart, who is radically deceived.

Bert: brainwashed victim.

Carl: brain-lesion victim, who believes because he smells freshly cut grass.

Madison notes that all four subjects share the same belief and are all above reproach, or are epistemically blameless, for believing as they do. But crucially is there not something more *epistemically* to be said of Al's and Al*'s believing, which cannot be said of either Bert or Carl? Specifically, Madison writes:

While all are blameless in believing as they do, surely Al and Al* have *better* rational support for their beliefs than Bert or Carl do: they hold their beliefs on the basis of evidence which they take to support the truth of what is believed, whereas Bert and Carl do not. (2014, 68)

Madison takes these comparative judgments to mitigate against the plausibility of suggesting that “mere blamelessness is what the internalist confuses for justification in the demon world” (2014, 68). Rather, as the thought experiment indicates, Al and Al* both enjoy a sort of superior epistemic standing of which Bert and Carl don't—a more robust epistemic status going beyond mere epistemic blamelessness.

If the disjunctivist were to insist that both Al and Al* are only merely epistemically blameless in believing as they do, she would be left without concepts for making the relevant distinctions between Al*, Bert, and Carl. If the best evaluation one can offer Al* is that of believing blamelessly, then one's at a loss for distinctions to put him in a better light than his brainwashed and lesion-suffering friends—contrary to intuition.

Given these data it's plausible that SOSI reflects a stronger kind of epistemic agreement between Al and Al*, beyond that of mere epistemic blamelessness.¹⁹

A more satisfying response to the first-order question comprising the NEG challenge should avoid these two difficulties. It shouldn't suggest that one cannot be moved by the thought ensconced in SOSI without substantive commitments in

¹⁹ A disjunctivist proponent of the blamelessness understanding of SOSI might balk at the suggestion that this thought experiment goes to support evidential internalism (and thus NEG). After all, to judge that both Al and Al* enjoy some form of rational or evidential support for their beliefs, whereas Bert and Carl do not, is consistent with Al and Al* enjoying different evidence—indeed even radically different *kinds*—a thesis incompatible with evidential internalism. After all, the disjunctivist need not be committed to the view that radically deceived subjects enjoy no evidential support at all. But again, Madison's goals are more modest. He is not aiming at a defense of classical internalism. Rather he's putting pressure on the disjunctivist thought that it's merely blamelessness that Al and Al* share.

epistemic deontology; and it should furnish materials sufficient for understanding how subjects like Al and Al* host beliefs which are better poised epistemically than those hosted by subjects such as Bert and Carl.

2.3

I've been saying that there's some positive epistemic status that's the same about your basic perceptual belief and that of your radically deceived counterpart. For example, it seems that Al and Al* enjoy *in equal measure* some grade of positive epistemic evaluation.

But, classical internalist thinking notwithstanding, it can't be that these two subjects share in available evidence. Not if ED is true. But then ED owes some understanding of SOSI consistent with the idea that Al and Al* differ in terms of their available evidence. Mere epistemic blamelessness is inadequate for this purpose for the considerations just explored. How else might the disjunctivist respond to the first-order question concerning what to say about subjects such as Al and Al*?

Consider first that while it's good that a belief be based on sufficient evidence, or that it be believed for the good reasons one has, it's *also* good that a belief be produced out of a virtuous character, or by an epistemically virtuous person. Such epistemic character traits are the focus of virtue responsibilists. *Virtue responsibilism* (see Zagzebski 1996) is typically distinguished from *virtue reliabilism*. While reliabilists conceive of epistemic virtues as seated in reliable cognitive faculties or mechanisms or skills, responsibilists would have virtue seated in acquired and enduring traits of character, or person-level dispositions of motivation and (epistemically relevant) action.²⁰

As Battaly (2008, 645) notes, "responsibilists differ over whether virtues require reliability". But if you think that reliability is unnecessary for responsibilist virtue possession, then there's no reason to think that one loses one's virtue if radically deceived. If reliability is merely *optional* in this way, then one's trait-level virtue can be held fixed across the situation in which one is radically deceived.

²⁰ For helpful commentary see Battaly (2008).

Beyond mere epistemic blamelessness, then, the disjunctivist might contend that Al and Al* are equally trait-level virtuous in believing as they do. The sameness of status which they both enjoy is that of a form of epistemic responsibility—Al* is no less trait-level virtuous than Al for believing the very same proposition while envatted.

Now is the claim at issue that both Al and Al* merely *possess* the same virtue, or that they actually *exercise* such virtue when each comes to believe that there's a ship at harbour? No doubt, I think, that they both possess the same quality of trait-level virtue—that each is equally well-disposed with respect to guiding himself to the truth—that each 'loves the truth' no less than the other. But I also want to say that this epistemic virtue is in both cases *employed* with respect to Al's and Al*'s believing. This is because I think SOSI reflects the thought that both Al and Al* share some positive epistemic status with respect to their believing as they do. Trait-level epistemic virtue doesn't look to be adequate for understanding the sameness of status at issue in SOSI if it is conceived such that one's believing bears no significant connection with it. Rather, I think that both Al and Al*'s beliefs relevantly manifest their trait-level epistemic virtue, or concern for the truth.

But you might wonder *how*, more precisely, Al and Al* manifest their concern for the truth in believing as they do. Well, very simply, in response to its looking as though there's a ship at harbour, both Al and Al* believe to this effect *for the consideration* that each *sees* that there's a ship at harbour. I mean that both subjects are motivated to accept their beliefs by considerations that, if true, wouldn't still allow that what each believes may still be false. Consider: who is more concerned about the truth as to whether *p* than the person whose acceptance of *p* is guided by what she takes to be a *factive* reason in her possession? Since I'm assuming reliability to be a non-issue, Al* need be no less virtuous than Al in this respect, even though he's completely unreliable in his circumstances.

Crucially, that both Al and Al* share in sameness of trait-level virtue is consistent with their differing in levels of evidential support—which is just what the proponent of ED needs. For why think that Al*'s impeccable epistemic character should secure him against thinking *falsely* that he's in possession of a factive reason? Indeed we might have *expected* so much from epistemically doomed

subjects. Al* is after all in maximally abysmal epistemic conditions. But he need be no less concerned for the truth than Al for being tricked into thinking that he believes as he does because of his seeing something to be the case, when this is false. Al*'s abysmal epistemic circumstances simply lead him to mistake his perceptual evidential ground for thinking that there's a ship at harbour. He *thinks* it's his seeing that there's a ship—but it isn't.

So in general good case and bad case subjects may possess and exercise their trait-level virtue to the same degree in believing, though the deceived subject simply mistakes her epistemic ground for something else (i.e. your radically deceived counterpart thinks their belief that *p* is because of their seeing that *p*, when really it's only something like their *seeming* to see that *p*).

But as we have noted in the previous subsection, trait-level virtue must do more than articulate a grade of positive epistemic status shared between Al and Al* which is consistent with their differing in evidential support. The epistemic status at issue must also illuminate our thinking about Al and Al* with respect to Bert and Carl. How then might trait-level virtue serve to epistemically distinguish Al*'s believing from that of lesion-suffering Carl?

2.4

It seems that trait-level virtue is successful for distinguishing Al*'s case from Carl's. For consider a paradigm epistemic character trait like conscientiousness (or a kind of general concern to believe that *p* if and only if *p*). Because Al* is through no fault of his own epistemically *doomed*—suffering as he is in maximally abysmal epistemic conditions—no measure of reflective wherewithal or doxastic regulation will secure him against thinking that there's a ship at harbour when there isn't. Given that Al*'s case is introspectively indistinguishable from Al's, plausibly Al* can exhibit conscientiousness as impressively as can be expected while continuing to think falsely that there's a ship at harbour.

However, the same cannot be said for lesion-suffering Carl. For if Carl did manifest the same degree of conscientiousness in believing as Al* believes, then he shouldn't go on thinking that there's a ship at harbour.

If Carl were even remotely conscientious, then upon considering his belief that there's a ship at harbour, he should recognize how irresponsible it would be to accept this belief, given his context. Remember, he's not being visually appeared to in the way that goes along with perceiving that there's a ship at harbour. His belief is based solely on his smelling freshly cut grass. To accept this belief in the teeth of his circumstances in this way is not to believe out of the same virtuous character as that manifested by Al*.

Unfortunately, though, while sameness of trait-level virtue is sufficient for distinguishing Al* from Carl in this way, it's not so clear that it does as well with respect to brainwashed Bert.

For one can imagine Bert suffering the worst of epistemic upbringings, such that his noetic structure is peppered with all manner of false beliefs about how to conduct inquiry, and what properly counts as evidence for what. Nevertheless there seems no principled reason to think him any less conscientious than Al*, less meticulous in gathering what he takes to be evidence, or generally less concerned about believing the truth.

Intuitively though—as Madison highlights—, Al* is epistemically better off than Bert. This is not something the disjunctivist can explain if the best epistemic status Al* shares with Al is trait-level virtue.

So the proponent of ED should like to have something in addition to trait-level virtue which would also capture the intuitive evaluative difference between Al* and brainwashed Bert. The first-order problem is not settled yet.

2.5

In addition to enjoying sameness of trait-level responsibility, I suggest that Al and Al* enjoy sameness of *reasonability* in that, as Sutton (2005, 373) has articulated, both believe as the reasonable person would believe, where the reasonable person “is one whose belief-forming faculties and habits (e.g. inferential habits) are such as to deliver knowledge when conditions are right.”

Both Al and Al* take themselves to see a ship at harbour, believing to this effect for the consideration that each *sees* there to be a ship at harbour. And when

conditions are right—as they are for Al, but not Al*—, they get to know perceptually that there's a ship at harbour.

Such is not the case, however, for poor brainwashed Bert. Even when conditions are optimal, Bert's belief-forming processes and habits do not secure knowledge for him, since he doesn't believe that there's a ship at harbour on the basis of anything that is even remotely truth-conducive (e.g. he believes on the basis of wishful thinking, say). As Madison points out, Bert is plausibly not to be blamed for this, least because he's been involuntarily brainwashed. Still, his situation on this occasion is not one in which he exercises belief-forming faculties and/or habits such that he would *know* the target belief in normal conditions. Bert's belief then in this sense isn't reasonable.

Again, that both Al and Al* are equally reasonable is consistent with their differing in evidential support for their beliefs. Al* might mistake the condition of his evidence, and this compatibly with his manifesting inferential habits of belief formation which are good for yielding knowledge in normal (good) conditions.²¹

For both Al and Al* believe that there's a ship at harbour on the basis of the consideration that they see that there's a ship at harbour. Of course only Al's consideration is also a good (normative) reason he has for thinking that's there's a ship at harbour, and so comes to know as a result. By contrast Al* doesn't have the good reason he thinks he has—he at best only seems to see a ship at harbour. But, again, this is not to say that he's any less reasonable than Al, despite the fact that his beliefs enjoy worse evidential support. After all, when conditions are right for Al*, and he believes as he does for this same reason when things look this way to him, he gets to know as a result.

I'm not the first to invoke a conception of reasonability for defending disjunctivist-type views in light of the first-order problem. For example, Millar (2011, 345) has this to say about one's belief in the bad case:

So my belief in the bad case is reasonable, in that, roughly speaking, it is a belief that a suitably equipped and competent person might well form in the

²¹ The inferential habit in question is something like this: (in cases where whether or not *p* is important) when it looks to Al* as if *p*, he believes that *p* for the reason that he sees that *p*.

envisaged situation without doxastic irresponsibility. This, or some refined version, is the truth behind the intuition [which I've called 'SOSI'].

You might conceive of the present project as offering such a “refined version”. I mean for my discussion to be complementary to what Millar is suggesting here—a kind of development of his notion of reasonability.

For you might think: in what sense, more specifically, is Al* “suitably equipped and competent” such that his belief merits a better epistemic evaluation than that of brainwashed Bert? Well, Al* understands which are the right considerations to have in mind when inferring from one’s situation that there’s a ship at harbour. Al* understands that his belief to this effect should be based on his *seeing that* there’s a ship at harbour. Bert doesn’t understand this, because he’s been brainwashed into thinking that other considerations merit inference to the conclusion that there’s a ship at harbour (perhaps he’s been brainwashed to think that he can safely infer this from the consideration that he *wishes* there was a ship at harbour).²²

2.6

So it seems to me that beyond mere blamelessness the disjunctivist might have the following to say concerning the first-order question, the question about what to say of the perceptual beliefs of one’s radically deceived counterpart: your radically deceived counterpart is no less trait-level virtuous nor less reasonable than you are for believing as you do— this despite the fact that her evidence is much worse.

This is to make an advance in the story given by disjunctivism regarding intuitions proponents of classical internalism take to motivate an incompatible

²² Millar (2014, 2) has also had this to say about reasonableness: “The good standing that the notion of reasonableness captures with respect to a belief depends on the subject’s situation being to that subject, in the circumstances, indistinguishable from one in which the belief is well-founded.” Of course, Millar must have in mind to restrict such subjects to those who are “suitably equipped and competent”, for otherwise brainwashed Bert’s perceptual belief is reasonable—for from his perspective it *does* seem as if his perceptual belief is well-founded. His brainwashing has caused him to be confused about what makes for ‘well-foundedness’ in cases of perceptual beliefs. Thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me think through these comments from Millar, and their bearing on the current project.

view—viz., evidential internalism. In grappling with the NEG challenge, disjunctivists can do better than insist that your radically deceived duplicate is no more epistemically blameworthy than you for holding the same beliefs (recall problems in 2.2 above). Rather she can say that your radically deceived duplicate manifests no less trait-level virtue than you in believing as you do, nor does she reveal herself to be any less reasonable. These statuses avoid needless tangles in epistemic deontology, are consistent with discrepancies in the available evidence and are sufficient for making the correct distinctions between our radically deceived counterparts, and other epistemic unfortunates.

2.7

Before moving ahead to address the diagnostic horn of the NEG challenge, I should like to address two objections. Firstly, the proponent of classical internalism might argue that ED's evidential externalism is under-motivated in the following way: why is the proponent of ED so eager to think that Al*'s evidence must be so much worse than Al's? After all, there are so many other ways to explain why Al*, but not Al, lack knowledge.²³

For instance, two subjects might enjoy the same degree of propositional justification furnished by the same evidence, yet only one subject knows, because the other's belief is either false, or the belief is not 'well-founded' on the evidence, or one's belief is 'Gettiered', or suffers some other form of knowledge-undermining luck, or etc.

In other words, since one doesn't need to assume that Al*'s evidential position is less strong than Al's for understanding why Al* (but not Al) is ignorant, you might think there's insufficient reason for thinking that Al and Al* must differ in available evidence on account of the fact that while Al knows, Al* doesn't.

In response, this simply misunderstands the motivation behind disjunctivist views. No one is arguing for ED (or for any other evidentially externalist position) on the grounds that lack of factive evidence is required for explaining one's

²³ Thanks to Brent Madison for inspiring the discussion to follow in this subsection.

ignorance in maximally abysmal epistemic circumstances where one is epistemically doomed. Rather ED is argued for on other grounds (see footnote 11).

But I should like to note another point in this connection that I have found under-appreciated in discussions on this issue. In predicting that your radically deceived counterpart has worse evidence for her perceptual beliefs than you do, ED might be seen to have the advantage over classical internalist positions in the following way: given that one is truly in maximally abysmal epistemic conditions, should we not expect that one's ignorance is superlatively *over-determined*? After all these subjects are in the direst, most abysmal epistemic circumstances we can imagine. We are not mincing words when we say that such subjects are epistemically *doomed*. One might think then that it's a *strength* of a position like ED that it accentuates this fact by predicting that such subjects haven't even a grip on their perceptual evidence for thinking the most basic things about the world (e.g. that there's a ship at harbour). Proponents of classical internalism might thus be accused of painting epistemological doom as too rosy—maintaining that while epistemically doomed subjects are vastly ignorant, at least they are believing in accordance with their evidence!

Secondly, the advocate of classical internalism might object in the following way: she might agree with me that Al and Al* are equally trait-level virtuous and/or reasonable in the senses I suggest, but nevertheless insist that each also share in evidential support for their beliefs. It's just intuitively obvious, she might say, that Al's evidence is no better than Al*'s.

Now obviously if it's a datum that you and your radically deceived counterpart share all the same evidence for your perceptual beliefs, then disjunctivism about perceptual knowledge is false. But clearly the disjunctivist can just deny that this *is* a datum—or else deny that this is as intuitive as the proponent of classical internalism suggests.

In fact the disjunctivist might well be skeptical that the classical internalist thinks that Al and Al* share the same evidence for no further reason at all (I mean beyond their merely 'intuiting it'). Rather, as I'll begin to describe in the next section, the disjunctivist might think that her internalist interlocutor is led to

choose sameness of evidence as the proper explanation for SOSI out of motivation to explain proper perceptual belief in a certain way.

2.8

In this section I have endeavoured to solve the first-order problem for disjunctivism, the first of the two problems comprising the NEG challenge for ED. Remember this was the question about how to explain a certain thought concerning you and your radically deceived counterpart—the NEG thought that your radically deceived counterpart is no less justified than you in believing as she does. I have conceived this thought in terms of ‘sameness of epistemic status’ (SOSI), and have sought to engage this problem in a way more satisfying than any to date.

I have said that—beyond mere ‘epistemic blamelessness’—your radically deceived duplicate needn’t be any less trait-level virtuous nor less reasonable than you for believing as she does. This is consistent with your both differing in available evidence for your perceptual beliefs. Moreover, this is more satisfying than mere blamelessness explanations for two reasons. First, these statuses avoid unnecessary tangles in issues to do with epistemic deontology. It’s better that disjunctivists have a solution to the first-order problem that doesn’t seemingly commit them to the existence of *bona fide* epistemic duties. In general, one shouldn’t over-commit, or commit beyond what is necessary for dealing with a problem. Secondly, going beyond mere blamelessness permits the disjunctivist to properly distinguish between our radically deceived duplicates and other epistemic unfortunates such as Bert and Carl.

3 Disjunctivism and the ‘Diagnostic’ Problem

In this section I address the second of the two questions comprising the NEG challenge for ED: the ‘diagnostic’ question. From SOSI the proponent of classical internalism draws the conclusion that evidential internalism is true, and thereby adopts the NEG thesis: that the evidence you have for your perceptual beliefs in the good case isn’t any better than the evidence your radically deceived counterpart

has in the bad case. Disjunctivists disagree that this is the lesson to be drawn from new evil genius considerations. Proponents of classical internalism should rather find their way to see that such subjects are equally well virtuous and reasonable in believing as they do, while differing in available evidence.

But then why is the classical internalist prone to disagree with the disjunctivist in this way? Why is the proponent of classical internalism prone to think that it's owing to you and your radically deceived counterpart *sharing the same evidence* that explains why we think they share some positive epistemic status (SOSI)? Even more importantly, why should this way of thinking be resisted? Why is it in error? This is the diagnostic problem for ED, which I address in this section.

3.1

I don't think the classical internalist adopts a kind of sameness of evidence explanation for the thought at issue in SOSI motivated by nothing other than sheer intuition. Rather I suspect that there's a deeper motivation for this choice of explanation. Moreover, I think there's good reason to learn to resist this motivation—reason that the disjunctivist can use for supporting her error theory.

Familiarly, internalists aim to explain how one is permitted to accept one's basic perceptual beliefs by appeal to some kind of 'rational support'. Evidentialists²⁴ among them think this is to be done by focusing on evidence: it's one's evidence that furnishes one's rational support for belief. The task then is to settle on a picture of one's available evidence or 'reasons for belief' which will explain how in general one is epistemically permitted to accept one's perceptual beliefs on the basis of that evidence.

Disjunctivist internalists explain that such rational support for perceptual belief is furnished in good cases by one's seeing that *p*. Proponents of classical internalism, on the other hand, explain that one's rational support is furnished in good cases by one's merely *seeming* to see that *p* (or some such).

Now any such theory of rational support for perceptual belief is evaluable in its capacity to explain perceptual knowledge either *before* or *after* one gets into a

²⁴ See, for example, Conee and Feldman (2004).

certain mood. That is to say, either before or after one comes to ‘feel’ the need for a demonstration of the truth of perceptual beliefs through some non-question-begging argument. Theories of rational support that are evaluated after one gets into this mood will be expected to explain our ‘permission’ to external world beliefs in a certain way. They’ll have to explain this permission by way of offering a kind of reassurance²⁵ that one can be *reconvinced* of one’s access to the external world, even after one has been made to seriously doubt it.

Such explanations belong to the so-called *vindictory* project in epistemology, which is sometimes contrasted with the more modest *explanatory* project.²⁶

Classical internalists want theories of rational support that are capable of providing *vindicating* explanations of our purchase on the external world—explanations which establish proper perceptual belief. Unless one’s theory of evidence or reasons for perceptual belief allows for some non-question-begging ‘inference-like’ move to the external world from some consideration that isn’t yet a purchase on that world, such a theory will not be fit for purpose.

Notice that disjunctivist theories of rational support are not fit for vindictory purposes. Such theories hold that one’s rational support is furnished by one’s *seeing that p*—this is one’s evidence, or the bit of information one has to go on in forming one’s perceptual belief. That one sees that *p* is not fit to convince one that one has a purchase on the fact that *p* *after* one’s begun to seriously doubt this—not unless one finds question-begging arguments convincing (seeing that *p* is *factive*, after all, entailing that *p*).²⁷

²⁵ Sandy Goldberg (forthcoming) notes that the classical internalist is especially concerned whether “what one takes to be adequate epistemic support *is in fact no such thing*”, and that “what is wanted is a form of reassurance in the face of this worry.”

²⁶ See, for instance, Greco (2010, 5).

²⁷ Compare this comment from McDowell (2002, 99–100): “Of course one does not *inherit* entitlement to, for instance, ‘There’s a candle in front of me’ from a commitment—to which one would have to be entitled—to ‘I see that there’s a candle in front of me’. One could not be entitled to ‘I see that there’s a candle in front of me’ while it was still in suspense whether one was entitled to ‘There’s a candle in front of me’—suspense that one would terminate, on this impossible picture, by inferring ‘There’s a candle in front of me’ from ‘I see that there’s a candle in front of me.’”

But evidentially internalist theories of rational support are fit for vindicatory purposes. Such theories hold out hope for explaining how it's permissible for one to accept one's perceptual beliefs so as to provide the relevant reassurance: that one could become *reconvinced* of one's hold on the truth about some basic perceptual matter *after* assuming that one hasn't as much.

This is no unfamiliar commentary. But a less familiar point can be made concerning the *stakes* at issue for the classical internalist with respect to how she conceives rational support for perceptual belief.

For unless she maintains her evidential internalism, thus standing by the NEG thesis (that one's evidence or rational support in the good case is never any better than one's rational support in the bad case), the classical internalist will be without a theory of rational support with which to work out a *vindicating* explanation of our epistemic permission to our basic perceptual beliefs. In such case the game would be up for the classical internalist, because the game would be up for the vindicatory project.²⁸

If she were to rescind on her evidential internalism about perceptual belief (by adopting disjunctivism, or the idea that $E=K$ ²⁹, or whatever) she would be left without a theory of rational support that could explain proper perceptual belief by vindicating such belief. Factive mental states aren't in the business of vindicating perceptual beliefs.

In other words, there's all the natural motivation in the world for the proponent of classical internalism to assume that it's because you and your radically deceived counterpart share the same evidence (your 'seeming seeings') for your perceptual beliefs that we think that there's some shared positive epistemic status between the two of you (SOSI). If she gave up this idea, after all, she would give up on the feature of classical internalism that is most distinctive of the view—viz., the

²⁸ It's true that there's logical space for rejecting evidential internalism without adopting a view of rational support which is unfit for functioning in vindicatory explanations of proper perceptual belief. For instance, perhaps one then adopts some form of evidential externalism on which one's evidence in the good case is different or even *better* than one's evidence in the bad case, but still falls short of being factive. While there's logical space for such a view, I can't imagine what it would look like, or how it might be motivated.

²⁹ This is the idea that your evidence equals all and only those propositions you know (see Williamson (2000)). This is a view about *evidence possession*, and it bears complicated and interesting relations to disjunctivism that I haven't time to discuss here.

view's perennial insistence on a vindictory explanatory conception of basic perceptual knowledge.

3.2

It's no news that the vindictory project has fallen into disrepute in recent years. But that's not as interesting for the disjunctivist's diagnostic purposes as some good reason to think this is where the project belongs. A good diagnosis should include an error theory. Why is the classical internalist wrong to be swayed in her thinking about the new evil genius by the vindictory project in epistemology?

In the previous subsection, I argued that it's entirely natural that the classical internalist assumes that it's the fact that you and your radically deceived duplicate share all your evidence that explains why we are prone to think that she's no less justified than you are. After all, if this is not the case, if we allow *factive reasons* through the door (which are incidentally unavailable to one in the bad case) then the rational support furnished by such evidence is not of the right cut to furnish vindictory explanations of proper perceptual belief.

In this subsection I'll offer some considerations that I think are available to the disjunctivist for understanding why the classical internalist's vindictory motive for adopting evidential internalism, although perfectly natural, is ultimately misguided.

The deepest problems with classical internalist views are familiar. Classical internalists seek a conception of rational support with which to furnish a vindictory conception of our 'epistemic right' to our external worlds beliefs. But for these purposes they are constrained to adopt a picture of rational support on which the best information anyone ever has to go on is the sort of information one would have anyway, even if radically deceived. If fundamentally "how reality appears to us to be is our only guide to how it *is*" (to quote Dougherty (2014, 101)), the inevitable burden for the proponent of classical internalism is to explain why appearances should ever tell accurately of the world they represent.

John McDowell (1995, 878) writes that "anyone who knows the dreary history of epistemology knows this hope is rather faint". But I think the situation is

in fact much worse for the classical internalist. It's not as though they might have some hope, which for inductive reasons is rather faint—rather I think they have no hope at all. Why is this?

There seems to be *in principle* reason for thinking that the classical internalist will be unable to vindicate proper perceptual believing if this is to be on the basis of mere 'seeming seeings' or perceptual appearances. For consider that since the classical internalist begins her vindicatory program from information available anyway, even if radically deceived, she would have to admit that even the most inventive attempt at 'establishing' our epistemic right to accept our external world beliefs would be available from 'within the vat', as it were. Any such explanation of why it's permissible, after all, for one to accept one's basic perceptual beliefs will be an explanation one's radically deceived brain-in-a-vat counterpart can put to use for vindicating *her* beliefs, as well.

In this way, there's no vindication to be had for our perceptual beliefs that doesn't also vindicate the beliefs of our radically deceived counterparts. But then you might worry that this is a strange kind of vindication the classical internalist holds out hope for. Does this even have the potential to look anything like an epistemic permission to accept our basic perceptual beliefs, if the very same permission is granted to the beliefs of maximally ignorant persons?

I suggest not. I suggest that you have no good reason to accept your perceptual beliefs so long as any such reason does just as well to permit the beliefs of maximally ignorant and radically epistemically doomed subjects. In fact I can't understand how any such 'legitimization' of perceptual beliefs is worth caring about from the epistemic point of view.

For these reasons I think the disjunctivist has good reason for thinking that the classical internalist vindicatory program has rightly fallen into disrepute. But now the disjunctivist has all she needs for responding to the diagnostic problem. The disjunctivist can diagnose the classical internalist's disagreeing with her over SOSI as a matter of the classical internalist being led naturally but mistakenly by a kind of vindicatory conception of the purpose of theories of rational support for perceptual beliefs.³⁰

³⁰ Thanks to an anonymous referee for helpful comments concerning the structure of this section.

4 Conclusion

The first-order problem and the diagnostic problem together constitute the NEG challenge for epistemological disjunctivism. In this paper I have endeavoured to respond to the NEG challenge on behalf of the disjunctivist.

With respect to the first-order problem, I argued that disjunctivists leave themselves vulnerable to criticism until they say more than they have said so far about the beliefs of your radically deceived counterpart. Beyond mere epistemic blamelessness, I argued that the disjunctivist can be more specific about the sort of status shared among good case and bad case epistemic counterparts—viz., subjects in bad cases are no less trait-level virtuous, nor less reasonable for adopting their perceptual beliefs.

But even with a satisfactory answer to the first-order question, a robust presentation of ED should include an answer to the diagnostic problem. What explains the disagreement between proponents of ED and classical internalists with respect to SOSI, and why are classical internalists mistaken to adopt a sameness of evidence explanation of new evil genius considerations?

I argued that it's quite natural for the proponents of classical internalism to take for granted the idea that your evidence is no better than that of your radically deceived counterpart—since they are committed to a certain vindicatory project in epistemology. Unless they adopt a strict evidential internalism about rational support, they haven't a theory of rational support to use in a vindicatory explanation of proper perceptual belief. The vindicatory project is itself a mistake, however—bordering on the incoherent. Classical internalists would thus do well to see themselves away from it. But then it isn't clear why they shouldn't think that you and your radically deceived counterpart can share in trait-level virtue and reasonability while differing in evidential support.

I conclude that there's no insurmountable NEG challenge for epistemological disjunctivism.³¹

³¹ Many thanks to Adam Carter, Brent Madison, and Duncan Pritchard for helpful comments on earlier drafts. Thanks as well to an anonymous referee for *Grazer Philosophische Studien*.

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