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An Explanation of Disagreements Over what Counts as Adequate Justification

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I

In public and private life, we often disagree about what counts as adequate justification. These disagreements can have massive consequences, as when climate change deniers hold that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change does not confer adequate justification regarding the existence of climate change. The disagreements can also be trivial, as when I hold that the opinions of my girlfriend's grandmother does not confer adequate justification regarding what is the best cure for a cold. Such disagreements can occur in most areas of our justificatory practices, and often devolve into shouting matches with no rational argument or epistemic virtue whatsoever. They might easily seem irrational. Can a theory of justification explain such disagreements?

It is desirable for a theory of justification to be more or less aligned with actual justificatory practices. In this paper I show how a theory of justification can integrate disagreements regarding what counts as adequate justification, and do so in a way which treats these disagreements as more than mere irrational shouting matches. My argument is inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (hereafter 'OC').² In OC, Wittgenstein claims that we can disagree about what counts as adequate justification. This led A. C. Grayling (2001: 309) to accuse *On Certainty*

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2 References to *On Certainty* will take the form 'OC: X', where x is the relevant section number(s).

of espousing relativist scepticism regarding justification: the view that what we count as justified is just one of many possible mutually incompatible sets of what is counted as justified, and that there is nothing more to justification than being 'justified relative to a system'.

Relativist scepticism regarding justification can be seen as troublesome, for the following reason: Justification is truth-conducive, and prima facie, a justified belief is more likely to be true than an unjustified belief. If being justified is *nothing more than* being justified relative to a system, we might fear that justification is not in fact truth-conducive, or that this truth-conduciveness is not guaranteed. After all, might not the belief be justified relative to a poor system, which does not correlate justification and truth? If we can only explain disagreement over what counts as adequate justification by opening for this fear, then we will lose more than we gain, and it is better to treat the disagreements as inexplicable. I will argue that we need not fear this.

In order to do so I will, in section II, outline a theory of justification inspired by OC. In section III, I set forth a crucial distinction between what I term, 'subjective justification' and, 'objective justification'. Roughly speaking, I am subjectively justified if, had all my beliefs regarding the matter at hand been true, I would have been justified. I am objectively justified iff I am subjectively justified, and all (or a sufficient number) of my beliefs regarding the matter at hand *are in fact true*. In section IV, I show how the theory of justification of section II can use the distinction between subjective and objective justification to integrate disagreements regarding what counts as justification without severing the link between justification and truth.

II

The theory of justification which follows tries to align itself as much as possible with our actual justificatory practices. Justification is to a large extent a social activity; we try to convince others to accept our positions, by showing how these positions are justified. We do so by giving reasons and evidence in favour of our position. Consider the following:

[...] Someone with bad sight asks me: 'do you believe that the thing we can see there is a tree?' I reply, 'I know it is; I can see it clearly and am familiar with it'. Or, A: 'Isn't N.N. at home?' B: 'I believe he is'. A: 'Was he at home yesterday?' B: 'Yesterday he was, I know he was; I spoke to him'. A: 'Do you know or only believe that this part of the house is built on later than the rest?' B: 'I know it is; I got it from so, and

so'. In these cases, then, one says, 'I know', and mentions how one knows, or at least one can do so (OC: 483—4).

In order to make a proper knowledge-claim, one must be able to mention how one knows. I take it for granted that one can only make a proper knowledge-claim that *X* if one's belief that *X* is justified. OC: 483—4 seems perfectly straightforward and yet, it conflicts everyday with many widely-held theories of justification. If one must be able to mention how one knows if one is justified, one's justification must be mentally accessible, and many, e.g. Goldman (1967), deny this. A full treatment of this debate would be far beyond the scope of this paper, and I will merely take it for granted that justification is *mentally accessible* and *evidentialist*.

Our everyday justificatory practices are also *linear*: If I say that I know that Anne has a boyfriend, you might ask me how I know this, and I might reply that Becky told me. Now, it is supremely reasonable to hold that a belief can only confer justification if it is itself justified. If Becky had only told me that Anne is going to the cinema with a young man, I (putatively) would not be justified in believing that Becky has told that Anne has a boyfriend, and hence I would not be justified in believing that Anne has a boyfriend. The linearity of justification, coupled with the claim that a belief can only confer justification if it is itself justified, leads to a familiar problem in epistemology: *the infinite justificatory regress*. I want to justify belief (1) by reference to belief (2), but, I can only do so if belief (2) is justified. I must justify belief (2) by reference to belief (3), but I can only do so if belief (3) is justified. I must justify belief (3) by reference to belief (4) [...] and so on. If we grant the linearity of justification, there are two ways of facing the infinite regress: either (A) let it run on forever, or (B) defuse it by holding that some beliefs can be justified even though they are not justified by reference to any other beliefs.

The infinite justificatory regress never arises in everyday discussions. We give reasons and justify ourselves up to a point, but sooner or later we stop. If our conversation partner refuses to accept *this* as a justification, we simply give up, and exclaim that our conversation partner does not understand what counts as adequate justification. Wittgenstein held that this is a crucial feature of our everyday justificatory practice; all linear justificatory chains stop at some beliefs which are held with absolute certainty (OC: 137). Examples of such beliefs are, 'all human beings have parents', 'this is a chair', 'all humans have lived their lives very close to the surface of the Earth'.³ Wittgenstein gives the following

³ The examples are mine, but are inspired by Moore (1959).

example: Consider a school teacher trying to teach a child that Athens is the capital of Greece. The pupil might ask how the teacher knows this:

The teacher will feel that this is not really a legitimate question at all. And it would be just the same if the pupil cast doubt on the uniformity of nature, that is to say on the justification of inductive arguments. The teacher would feel that this was only holding them up, that this way the pupil would only get stuck and make no progress. And, he would be right. It would be as if someone were looking for some object in a room; he opens a drawer and doesn't see it there; then he closes it again, waits, and opens it once more to see if perhaps it isn't there now, and keeps on like that. He has not learned to look for things. In the same way, this pupil has not learned how to ask questions (OC: 315).

This quote contains two crucial points. Firstly, that justificatory chains end, and they end in a variety of common-place and theoretical beliefs. In a memorable phrase, these beliefs are like the hinges on which our investigations and epistemic practices turn (OC: 343). If we doubt these 'hinges', we will not get anywhere, and will be stuck in a manner similar to the person opening and closing his drawer. Secondly, that we are *taught*, explicitly or implicitly, where the justificatory chains end; this knowledge is not innate, nor do we reach it through pure rational introspection. Joachim Schulte (2005: 69) stresses the close connection between the community we live in and what beliefs we hold as 'hinges'. He holds that the 'hinges' are part of the inheritance of 'the more or less theoretical means we have devised for coping with the world we live in'. It is crucial to note that this does not mean that the 'hinges' are necessarily true. In section IV, I discuss an example where they are not.

I will refer to the 'hinges' as Moorean Propositions, or MPs for short, as they were first drawn attention to by Moore (1959). The theory of justification I will embrace is one where a belief *B* is justified iff a linear, evidentialist, justificatory chain goes from *B* and terminates in a Moorean Proposition.⁴

III

Having outlined the theory of justification in the last section, I can now move on to the distinction between subjective justification and objective

⁴ I will not discuss if Moorean Propositions themselves can be justified, how they can be justified or whether they are justified. For discussions of this, see McGinn (1989) and Pritchard (2011).

justification. A speaker is subjectively justified in his belief that *P* iff were all the speaker's beliefs regarding *P* true and known to be true, the speaker would be certain that he is justified in his belief that *P*, and his certainty would be reasonable. A speaker is objectively justified in his belief that *P* iff a sufficient conjunction of the beliefs used to justify the belief that *P* are *in fact* true and really do confer justification. You can believe that you are justified in believing that *P* due to a belief that *Q*; if your assessment of the situation has been thorough, it follows that your belief that *P* is subjectively justified. However, *Q*, might be false, and it might then be the case that you are not objectively justified in your belief that *P*.

Objective justification entails subjective justification. Subjective justification does not entail objective justification. The distinction between objective and subjective justification is highlighted in the following example:

Tragedy: Isaac convincingly threatens Julie, a police officer, with a gun replica, such that Julie is justified in believing that she is being threatened with a real gun. Believing no other course of action open to her, Julie shoots Isaac.

It is clear that Julie was subjectively justified in believing that she was being threatened with a gun, and, I assume, subjectively justified in believing that no other course of action was open to her. It is also clear that Julie was not objectively justified in believing that she was being threatened with a real gun and that shooting Isaac was the only course of action open to her; if Julie had no false beliefs, and knew that Isaac only had a gun replica, she would not have shot him.⁵

IV

The aim of this paper is to show how a theory of justification can integrate disagreements regarding what counts as adequate justification, in a way which treats these disagreements as more than inexplicable irrationality on the behalf of one of the participants. Wittgenstein gives an example of one such disagreement:

⁵ The distinction between subjective and objective justification is brought out very strongly by examples such as *Tragedy*. Nevertheless, the distinction makes a claim which has sometimes been denied, namely that a belief can be justified even if its truth is not one hundred percent certain. Since this claim does not square with our everyday justificatory practices, I reject it (see OC: 12, 13). See also the end of section IV.

Supposing we met people who did not regard [scientific experiments] as a telling reason. Now how do we imagine this? Instead of the physicist, they consult an oracle. (And for that, we consider them primitive). Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it? If we call this 'wrong', aren't we using our language-game as a base from which to *combat* theirs? And are we right, or wrong, to combat it? Of course there are all sorts of slogans which will be used to support our proceedings. Where two principles really do meet, which cannot be reconciled with one another, then, each man declares the other a fool and heretic. I said I would, 'combat' the other man, but wouldn't I give him reasons? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes persuasion. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives). (OC: 609—612).

The passage claims that when disagreement about what counts as adequate justification happens, our arguments about whether or not a given belief is justified do not involve reason. This aligns with my initial presentation of the issue. Rather, they involve coercive persuasion; combatting the other, converting him to our side. *Prima facie*, we might think that you can never be (subjectively) justified in holding a belief if you were initially coerced into holding it. Section II above, gives us reason to doubt this *prima facie* intuition; our justificatory practices are intimately connected to what we have been *taught*, and some things we have been taught not through reasons, but through persuasion. An example would be a child learning the multiplication table; his teacher tells him that something is the case, e.g. $6 * 7 = 42$, and once the child has learnt the multiplication table, he sees that it is indeed the case. However, different people learn different things. As Wittgenstein points out in the above quote, this means that different things will count as adequate (subjective) justification to different people.

Call the people in Wittgenstein's example the Delphists. We and the Delphists share some views of what are adequate grounds for justification; we would both accept: 'this is my hand', 'I am sitting on a chair', etc., as Moorean Propositions, i.e., adequate end-points for justificatory chains. However, the Delphists also hold that oracular prophecy are adequate end-points for justificatory chains, and deny that laboratory experiments are adequate end-points for justificatory chains.

We, of course, deny the justificatory power of oracular power, and extoll the justificatory virtue of properly carried-out laboratory experiments. The set of our Moorean Propositions, while overlapping, does not coincide. Call the Moorean Propositions unique to the Delphist Delphist Propositions, DP. And, call the Moorean Propositions unique to

us Scientific Propositions, SP. Continue to refer to the Moorean Propositions we have in common as MPs. If I have a discussion with a Delphist about a proposition *P*, and both the Delphist and I have only MPs at the end of the justifications we give, then, 'our principles can be reconciled with one another', and we need only appeal to reasons and justifications in our discussion. Our discussion will be rational and might exemplify epistemic virtues. But, if we disagree about a proposition *Q*, and at the end of my justificatory chain is an SP, or at the end of the Delphist's justificatory chain is a DP, or both, then matters cannot be resolved as straightforwardly.

When we try to engage in an argument about *Q*, the Delphist justifies himself using means I do not count as valid justification (and vice versa). This is why we can only, 'declare the other a fool and heretic' (OC: 611). Yet, Wittgenstein also insists that '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' (OC: 286). The quote is ambiguous; is the Delphists' the poorer system of knowledge *from our perspective*, or is it *objectively poorer*? I will read Wittgenstein as saying 'objectively poorer'. Let us consider what sorts of combats we and the Delphists might engage in to establish whether the DPs should yield before the SPs or vice versa. We might engage in trials of predictive power. A set of challenges are set, some of which are specified by the Delphists, some of which are specified by us. If we predict the correct outcome more often than the Delphists, we might slowly convert them to our view, and make them abandon their Delphist Propositions.

Failure in such predictive trials would erode the support the DPs have in the Delphist's belief systems. The failure would *not* make the Delphist's rationally abandon the DPs due to a further belief that predictive trials should validate all types of adequate justification.⁶ Rather, it would place the Delphists under mental stress due to the repeated, and for them inexplicable, predictive failure of the DPs. It is important to note that such predictive trials would only work if we, and the Delphists, shared many Moorean Propositions, and had a roughly similar way of life. If this were not the case, we might not be able to agree on what would count as success or failure in the trial. But, we and the Delphists alike are human, and being human we are biologically and psychologi-

6 If this had been the case, we and the Delphists would agree regarding what should count as adequate justification; our apparent divergence would be due to us knowing empirical facts regarding predictive success and failure which the Delphists did not know about until they saw the results of the predictive trials. This is not what I mean, nor is it what Wittgenstein meant, by 'conversion'.

cally very similar, and so we are likely to have roughly similar ways of life.

The case of the Delphists illustrates how, on the theory of justification presented, there can be a multiplicity of what counts as subjective justification. Due to this multiplicity, our normal justificatory practices might come short in discussions with those with different practices, e.g. the Delphists. Relativism about subjective justification leads to the need for ‘combats’ of the sort described above, for we cannot rationally discuss the ‘hinges’ on which our justificatory practices turn. However, we can here simply beg the case against scepticism and hold that these ‘combats’ will have a single victor.⁷ If this is the case, then we can accept the multiplicity of subjective justification and still reject relativism about objective justification, and hence we can also reject relativism about truth. Grayling’s worries were misplaced.

However, in integrating disagreements about what counts as adequate justification, the theory of justification entails relativism about subjective justification. Should this trouble us? After all, the Delphists held the Delphist Propositions to be justified, even though they were false. So, might not the Scientific Propositions and the rest of our Moorean Propositions also turn out to be false? By allowing people to be subjectively justified in holding false beliefs, are we cheapening the very concept of justification?

Wittgenstein considers such an argument in OC: 599. He concludes that ‘the argument is worthless’. A belief that *P* might be subjectively justified, and we might be warranted in making a knowledge-claim that *P*, even though *P* is false. A refusal to do so would be to equate subjective justification with absolute certainty. In actual practice we do not do so (OC: 12, 13). We distinguish between objective and subjective justification, and this distinction collapses if subjective justification presupposes absolute certainty. If we accept our actual justificatory practices as roughly correct, which Wittgenstein holds that we should, it follows that we should not be worried by the fact that one might be subjectively justified without being objectively justified. Hence, I have shown that disagreements about what counts as adequate justification are not inexplicable, and that they should not make us worry; that what we count as adequate justification is in fact, inadequate.

⁷ Some might hold that a theory of justification, if correct, should intrinsically disprove scepticism. I here reject this requirement: the theory of justification presented does not disprove scepticism. It must rely on anti-sceptical arguments to do so. I do not hold this to be a weakness of the theory, but others might.

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