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EPISTEMIC CONSERVATISM

Evaluation and Defence



Geertjan H. Holtrop

EPISTEMIC CONSERVATISM

Evaluation and Defence



Geertjan Halbe Holtrop

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VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

EPISTEMIC CONSERVATISM

Evaluation and Defence

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor of Philosophy aan
de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
op gezag van de rector magnificus
prof.dr. J.J.G. Geurts,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
ten overstaan van de promotiecommissie
van de Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen
op vrijdag 2 december 2022 om 9.45 uur
in een bijeenkomst van de universiteit,
De Boelelaan 1105

door

Geertjan Halbe Holtrop

geboren te Wieringen

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Introduction

1. Epistemic Justification

Humans are believing creatures. We believe that the sky is blue, the grass is green, and the sun is shining. Some of us believe in the existence of God, whilst some of us do not. There are those that deny climate change is caused by human activity and there are those who wholeheartedly believe it is. We believe many things and although people usually think they are right in believing what they do, we know that some of us, some of the time, must be wrong. Therefore, when we are right, it must be because our beliefs satisfy some standard. In epistemology—the philosophical discipline that studies knowledge, belief, and its reasonableness—*epistemic justification* is an important standard via which beliefs can be evaluated.

Epistemic justification is a topic of much debate amongst philosophers. These discussions relate not only to its structure and its relation to knowledge, evidence, perception, and testimony, but also to its value and whether it is internal or external to the mind. Indeed, contemporary discussions of this nature extend well beyond the examples given above. A fundamental discussion questions whether the notion of epistemic justification can even be consistently analysed. William Alston (2005), for example, suggests that “there isn’t any unique, epistemically crucial property of beliefs picked out by ‘justified’” (11). Yet Alston still sees the value of researching different justificatory principles, as they may point to something desirable in epistemology. In this dissertation, I contribute to current research into epistemic justification by focusing on a specific justificatory principle, namely, that of epistemic conservatism. In particular, I examine the plausibility of this principle.

2. Epistemic Conservatism

Epistemic conservatism claims that the mere fact that a person holds a belief is sufficient to justify holding on to that belief in the absence of anything that challenges it—or, as epistemologists say, in the absence of a defeater. No further evidence or reasons in support of the belief are required. This idea is both radical and intuitive: radical by virtue of the minimalistic demands it imposes in order for a belief to be justified; intuitive because we think we are justified in holding on to most of our beliefs, even if we do not have a particular reason to do so.

It is important to note that epistemic conservatism claims that every belief held by a person is *prima facie* justified for that person. This means that before considering all relevant factors, such as evidence against a belief, a belief is justified. Of course, all relevant factors should be considered and, if these factors favour the belief, we can speak of *ultima facie*, or all things considered justification. In epistemic conservatism, the relevant factors are those things that can defeat justification, for example, evidence that shows one's belief is false. If the defeat condition is satisfied—i.e., it is the case that there is a defeater—then the *prima facie* justification of the belief is lost. If there are no defeaters, then one might say that the *prima facie* justification is conserved and can be considered *ultima facie* justification.

An advantage of epistemic conservatism is that we can justify holding on to many of our everyday beliefs—i.e., we are not supposed to doubt them all, unless we have some justifier that allows us to continue to hold on to them. In this way, epistemic conservatism fits well with our actual epistemic practice and explains why we in fact have many justified beliefs. Moreover, it is cognitively efficient, as we can preserve our cognitive resources whilst still holding many such beliefs. There is empirical evidence that the cognitive limitations of humans suggest that

a given individual cannot process the amount of information needed for the number of beliefs held.¹

The first expression of epistemic conservatism in philosophical literature was made by Roderick Chisholm (1982).² A contemporary of Chisholm, Richard Foley (1983) responded to this and concluded that epistemic conservatism was an implausible idea and should be dismissed. Ever since Foley's article on the topic, the dynamic of the discussion has been generally dismissive of conservatism and its proponents thus face an uphill battle. In this dissertation, I evaluate various versions of epistemic conservatism as well as the objections voiced against it. As will become clear, I conclude that Chisholm was indeed on to something, proposing my own version of conservatism that I claim is plausible.

3. Research Questions

The main question I want to answer is whether epistemic conservatism is plausible. With plausibility I mean the qualification that an idea—in this case, epistemic conservatism—has sufficient in its favour to be considered for further discussion. If epistemic conservatism indeed proves plausible, then it will reveal itself to be an idea in line with our epistemic practices—one that is intuitive, and for which there are no obvious counterexamples. Of course, this implies that, unless one can prove implausibility, a plausible idea has to be presumed valid and can be used to develop other ideas. In order to establish whether epistemic conservatism is plausible, I need to answer the following questions:

-
- 1 The psychologist George Miller (1956) suggested that we can only process around 7 variables at any given time, however, we clearly hold (many) more than 7 beliefs, and thus the evidence needed to support these beliefs may surpass this number. Indeed, a more recent study shows that the estimate of 7 is perhaps a little rigid, whilst, nonetheless, showing that our working memories are still very limited (Ma, Husaine, and Bays 2014).
 - 2 Chisholm (1989, 63) objected to being labelled an epistemic conservative. In fact, the term "epistemic conservatism" is popularised by one of its opponents, Richard Foley, and labelling Chisholm's ideas as such was part of his argumentative strategy to dismiss them.

- What are the motivations for epistemic conservatism?
- What versions of epistemic conservatism have been presented?
- What objections have been levelled against it?
- How do these objections affect different versions of epistemic conservatism?
- What, then, are the criteria for a plausible version of epistemic conservatism?

In addition to my endeavour to answer these questions, I will also work towards my own affirmative, plausible version of conservatism.

4. Method

I will evaluate epistemic conservatism as a principle of justification. Therefore, I require criteria, on the basis of which I can evaluate different versions of conservatism. In order to simultaneously address the various objections against conservatism, a majority of the criteria for the plausibility of a principle of justification will be derived from objections against conservatism. This means that a version of epistemic conservatism that can satisfy all these criteria will also be immune to any objections raised against it. This list of criteria will necessarily grow as I proceed through the literature, evaluating existing versions of epistemic conservatism. This of course means that not all versions of conservatism will be evaluated with the use of all criteria. However, I do not consider this to be a problem as the versions evaluated first are considered implausible, even on the basis of the initial criteria that I use to evaluate all formulations.

The criteria developed in this dissertation do not depend on a commitment to other principles or theories of justification or other major epistemic theories such as confirmation theory. Epistemic conservatism might even be incompatible to other principles and theories. However, the aim of the dissertation is to develop a version of epistemic conservatism that is immune to objections that have been levelled in the literature against (infelicitous) versions of epistemic conservatism. My aim is not to refute each and every theory that might be deemed incompatible with epistemic conservatism.

5. Structure

The first six chapters of this dissertation are a discussion and evaluation of the most prominent versions of epistemic conservatism and of most, if not all, objections against epistemic conservatism that have been made in the literature thus far.

In chapter 1 I show the basic motivation behind the discussion on epistemic conservatism, or rather, why someone would be attracted to epistemic conservatism in the first place. I also discuss a number of distinctions that have been made in the literature on the notion of epistemic justification and relate them to conservatism.

In chapter 2 I consider Agrippa's trilemma, which has been very influential in the discussion on epistemic justification. This trilemma is used to form the first three criteria for the plausibility of epistemic conservatism.

The third chapter addresses Roderick Chisholm's (1982) version of epistemic conservatism. Subsequently, I examine Foley's (1983) criticism of epistemic conservatism and Chisholm's version in particular, upon which I formulate an additional criterion for plausibility. I then evaluate Chisholm's conservatism on the basis of the four criteria formulated thus far and conclude that Chisholm's version of conservatism is indeed implausible.

In the fourth chapter, I address higher-order conservatism, paying special attention to the version put forward by Jonathan Kvanvig (1989). According to Kvanvig, all versions of first-order conservatism are implausible and therefore we accept higher-order conservatism instead. On the basis of this discussion of Kvanvig's version, I formulate the fifth criterion for plausibility and, after evaluation on the basis of the five criteria, conclude that Kvanvig's conservatism is also implausible.

In chapter 5 I assess most, if not all, objections that have been made against epistemic conservatism since Kvanvig's discussion. The chapter features the objections from Hamid Vahid (2004) and David Christensen (1994), which, along with Foley's objections discussed in chapter 3, are the most influential objections in current literature. In addition, I

discuss Ted Poston's (2012) defence of epistemic conservatism as well as his suggestion for improving current formulations thereof.

In chapter 6, I address Kevin McCain's conservatism—the most promising version so far. McCain (2008) argues that his version has taken into account the discussion and objections that have been levelled by Foley, Vahid, Christensen, and others, and therefore withstands critical scrutiny. Moreover, he argues that his version provides a solid defence against the sceptic's Alternative Hypotheses Argument³ and the Problem of Easy Knowledge⁴ (McCain 2008). Although McCain's version of conservatism fares better than the other versions I have discussed, I argue that the sacrifices he has to make, carry consequences, not least that his theory is no longer a theory of epistemic conservatism and therefore no longer offers its supposed virtues and benefits. Hence, I conclude that he too has failed to give us a plausible version of epistemic conservatism.

Chapter 7 presents my proposal for a plausible version of epistemic conservatism. Since beliefs can come in degrees, I also take this into account, leading to *prima facie* justification coming in different degrees as well. I propose to understand the defeat condition in terms of doubt. This is followed by an evaluation of my version of epistemic conservatism, concluding that it satisfies all criteria and is therefore a plausible theory of epistemic justification.

In the final chapter, I address principles or theories of justification that share a family resemblance to epistemic conservatism. This chapter deals especially with the similarities and differences with phenomenal conservatism, dogmatism, and credulism. Moreover, it contains suggestions on how epistemic conservatism should be placed within the broader discussion.

3 Richard Feldman (2003) has given a modern explanation of this argument.

4 See Stewart Cohen (2002) for the original explanation of the Problem of Easy Knowledge.

Chapter 1

The *Prima Facie* Case For Epistemic Conservatism

Prior to my discussion of the different versions of epistemic conservatism, I first want to take a moment to show why conservatism is so attractive. Whilst there is an intuitive case for conservatism, it also possesses particular virtues, such as cognitive efficiency and the justification of beliefs derived stemming from our memory. In addition, I also argue that rejecting conservatism and accepting the opposite—epistemic revisionism—is implausible. Finally, I address and clarify the concept of justification in epistemic conservatism and discuss what conservatism can add to the field of epistemology.

1.1 Conservative Intuitions

Take the following examples of beliefs one might have:

- a) I am awake and not dreaming that I am writing.
- b) The book I put on the bookshelf yesterday is still there, even if I do not look at it.
- c) The city of Gouda has not suddenly sunk completely into its boggy soil.
- d) My neighbours have not moved out whilst I was asleep.
- e) I still like coffee, even though it has been a few hours since I had some.
- f) Studying philosophy is not forbidden by law.

Each of the above beliefs appear reasonable, even in the absence of convincing evidence, as it can be shown they are the result of a reliable cognitive process. It would seem to be unreasonable to doubt many such beliefs, unless we have some special reason for doing so, such as being informed of a shocking new scientific discovery, reading a breaking news item, or being confronted with a disruptive calamity. Indeed, intuitively speaking, it would appear that we hold many beliefs that would be unreasonable to doubt. However, many such beliefs do not seem to satisfy common epistemic standards for justification, for example having sufficient evidence for the belief that the belief is more likely than its negation, the existence of insights into a particular reliable process from which the beliefs originate, or because of a causal link to these beliefs. Such beliefs are justified to hold on to without a particular justifier other than the fact that they are beliefs that one holds and there is no reason to doubt them. Hence, if we are to take the everyday beliefs we hold seriously, it seems that there is an intuitive case for epistemic conservatism.

Interestingly, a common reaction to the idea of epistemic conservatism are intuitions that count against it. Take for example the following propositions:

- aa) There is teapot owned by Bertrand Russel flying in outer space.

- bb) There is an invisible and undetectable flying spaghetti monster.
- cc) The moon is made of Gouda cheese.
- dd) If I close the door of my room, everything behind the door stops existing.
- ee) If I walk over the edge of a cliff, I will not fall off.
- ff) All other persons of whom I am aware are figments of my imagination.

Do these apparently absurd propositions constitute counterexamples against epistemic conservatism and hence nullify any intuition in favour of it? Not at all. First, epistemic conservatism is about beliefs that a person in fact believes and is justified to hold on to, but I do not know of anyone who in fact believes propositions aa) to ff) above, whereas I believe propositions a) to f). Of course, there might be those who claim to believe one of the propositions aa) to ff), but all the claims to that effect that I am aware of are clearly not genuine and only made for political or rhetorical purposes. Perhaps there are those who are extremely gullible and (most likely misled by other people or influenced by hallucinogenic drugs that interfere with their cognitive abilities) believe one of the propositions aa) to ff) or some similar proposition to be true. Would we then have a clear counterexample? No, because we immediately see such beliefs as absurd and there are obvious reasons to doubt them that are easily accessible to most people. For example, a belief in a flying spaghetti monster is obviously absurd because we know that spaghetti is a food invented in Italy. Moreover, the concept seems internally contradictory because spaghetti is both visible and detectable, and yet it is supposed to be a constituting element of an invisible and undetectable entity, so we have extremely good reasons to doubt that such an internally inconsistent and extremely unlikely combination of qualities exists. Similar argumentations can be put forward for the other propositions. The supposed counterexamples do no harm to conservative intuitions because the presence of defeaters shows us clearly why someone should not continue to hold on to such beliefs.

One can propose many potential beliefs that might not be obviously reasonable to hold in the absence of doubt about them or to simply reject

outright because of their obvious absurdity. Hence, there is a challenge for the proponent of conservatism who wishes to show that it does not only give an explanation for the intuitive reasonableness of holding on to beliefs like a) to f). In addition, the defeat condition that is part of an epistemic conservative principle needs to line up with beliefs that are intuitively unreasonable to hold, such as beliefs aa) to ff). In any case, I think our conservative intuitions are clear enough to warrant a deeper discussion of epistemic conservatism.

1.2 Memory Beliefs and Lost Evidence

A challenge in epistemology is to show why the beliefs that stem from our memories are justified. In this respect, Matthew McGrath (2007) has argued that epistemic conservatism offers the best explanation. He observes that “we typically do not abandon our beliefs unless we have special reasons to do so” (McGrath 2007, 1). According to McGrath, two further concepts that seek to explain how memory beliefs can be justified, prove inadequate.

The first is preservationism—the view that the justification of the belief is preserved along with the belief because of its connection with the past. Preservationism does not mean that the original mental states that conferred justification upon the belief are preserved, since then there would be nothing special about the rationality of memory beliefs. Rather, preservationism suggests that the justification of the belief at this moment comes from “the fact that [a belief] has been preserved from an original rational acquisition” (McGrath 2007, 4). However, according to McGrath, this view leads to counterintuitive results. Imagine two memory beliefs that are similar in all aspects except that one of them was formed justifiably and the other was formed unjustifiably and, as is the case with many beliefs, you have forgotten the original evidence for both. Maintaining the first belief would be judged justified, but maintaining the second would not, even though, at the present moment, a person cannot see any difference between the two and his memory is equally reliable in both cases. Even though the evidence needed for justification is unavailable, it still plays a crucial role in the justification and mainte-

nance of a given belief. This is problematic and should be avoided, and hence preservationism is considered unacceptable (McGrath 2007, 3–7).

The second view McGrath (2007) dismisses is evidentialism—the view that we are justified in maintaining our memory beliefs because the belief fits the evidence we have. In a case in which we remember the evidence along with the belief itself, this seems unproblematic: the remembered belief fits the evidence one has, just as it once fitted the evidence the moment one first formed the belief. However, since we often forget our original evidence, the evidentialist will have to argue that the memory beliefs fit with the current evidence we have. The evidentialist requires second-order evidence—that is, evidence about the memory of your belief instead of about the belief itself (McGrath 2007, 8). This is problematic, because we often do not have sophisticated constructions about the evidence for the trustworthiness of our memory for every memory belief we have. For example, children do not seem to have this, yet we do consider their memory beliefs justified. Moreover, it does not explain why maintaining such beliefs is justified in the time between their formation, losing the original evidence, and reaffirming them through second-order evidence. An evidentialist might instead require memorial experience as evidence—something that would be analogous to the way perceptual experience can justify perceptual beliefs. The problem with this is that the necessary phenomenology of memory beliefs is lacking. As McGrath (2007, 11) states, many of our memory beliefs have an associated memory phenomenology. For example, when one recalls a person, one has an image of this person. However, there are many memories that do not have such images, for example remembering the contents of a conversation without an image of the conversation itself. On this point, as McGrath (2007, 10–11) suggests, the evidentialist cannot explain how memory beliefs without a memory phenomenology can still be justified. Robert Audi (2011, 70) follows a similar argument, suggesting that there is a disanalogy between perceiving and remembering because images of the remembered object are neither sufficient nor necessary for remembering that object. For this reason, evidentialism also fails to explain the justification of most of our memory beliefs.

For the reasons outlined above, epistemic conservatism remains the only viable option via which to explain the justification of memory beliefs. According to McGrath (2007), “conservatism holds that if one believes that *p*, then one is *prima facie* [justified] in retaining that belief” (14). Conservatism requires neither the problematic second-order evidence or memorial experience of the evidentialist, nor a link to inaccessible facts in the past of the preservationist. Therefore, McGrath (2007) suggests, “[conservatism] makes the rationality of belief retention a matter of one’s current perspective” (22). Since memory beliefs play an important role in our everyday epistemic lives, the explanatory role that conservatism can play in their justification is a virtue. For this reason, Abelard Podgorski (2016, 353) cites this as one of the canonical virtues of conservatism.

1.3 Cognitive Efficiency

The second canonical virtue of epistemic conservatism, according to Podgorski (2016, 351), is that it limits the cognitive costs of rational beliefs and that, since we have limited cognitive resources, it is rational to minimise those costs. It is obvious that *prima facie* justification stemming from the mere fact that *S* believes that *P* has little cognitive costs. After all, nothing else but the belief itself is required for *prima facie* justification in epistemic conservatism. However, it is not obvious that satisfying the defeat conditions comes at low cost, too. This depends on the contents of those conditions. For example, an extreme version would require a person to search for possible defeaters in all information that is directly or indirectly available—even with an internet connection, such an endeavour would result in significant cognitive cost. Still, if conservatism does not require any special cognitive efforts in order to satisfy its defeat conditions, then conservatism would have relatively low cost, since other theories require cognitive efforts in addition to addressing the defeat conditions. In any case, the supposed cognitive efficiency of conservatism has been recognised as a virtue by various philosophers (Harman 1986; Lycan 1988; McGrath 2007; Poston 2012).

Richard Foley (1983, 170) pointed out that considerations of practical rationality, such as believing something because it is beneficial for the believer to do so, are not part of a fully epistemic defence of conservatism. Thus, the mere fact that conservatism is cognitively efficient is not a good epistemic reason for its use. Although I am not sure if Foley's epistemic puritanism is widely shared, I think that two points can be derived from his view that are widely shared: First, the desirability of epistemic conservatism cannot solely depend on the practical considerations in its favour, such as cognitive efficiency. It also depends on its ability to survive epistemic scrutiny. Second, if epistemic conservatism can survive such scrutiny, in a way that is similar to other epistemic theories that are widely held, then cognitive efficiency becomes a reason to favour it over those other theories. So, *ceteris paribus*, the cognitive efficiency of conservatism helps its case.

1.4 The Implausibility of Epistemic Revisionism

The above arguments for conservatism become even stronger when we realise what its denial would entail. Imagine the implication of the denial of conservatism and opt for the only reasonable alternative principle that says that if a person has a belief, she should not maintain this belief unless there is something that should make her think otherwise—something we could call epistemic revisionism. Epistemic revisionism demands ongoing, continual sustenance of justification of the beliefs held. So, if I believe that I like coffee with milk but without sugar, then the epistemic revisionist will have to argue that at every moment of the day, I cannot justifiably maintain the belief that I like coffee with milk but without sugar unless there is something that should make me think otherwise. The only alternative to revisionism and conservatism is scepticism, because if a belief does not remain justified in the absence of defeaters (conservatism) or because there is something that sustains the justification (revisionism), then beliefs never remain justified. Hence, given the denial of scepticism, the choice is between epistemic revisionism and epistemic conservatism.

An epistemic revisionist will either have to say that many of our beliefs are in fact not justified to hold on to, or argue that there are enough ways to justify maintaining many of our beliefs, including many of our everyday beliefs. In the example above, an epistemic revisionist might say that one is indeed not justified unless one remembers one's coffee preferences from previous experiences and the memory alone is sufficient for justification of that belief. However, this approach also raises an important question: should the person be aware of the justifier or not? In the example, the question is whether one should be aware of one's memory about one's coffee preferences in order for the belief to be justified to hold on to.

In contemporary epistemology, various views on the degree of awareness of the justifier are held—the internalism-externalism debate.⁵ The strongest position is a form of access internalism that holds that the subject should be aware of the justifier—for example, a memory, an experience, or a reasoning.⁶ A somewhat weaker position is a form of access internalism that holds that it is possible to become aware of the justifier, but one does not in fact have to be aware of it.⁷ More versions of internalism can be found in the literature, but what they all share is that a subject needs some form of access to what makes beliefs justified. This is in contrast to externalism, in which the aforementioned access is not necessary and so no form of awareness of what plays a role in the justification is required. According to the strongest form of access internalism, epistemic revisionism is implausible since one would need to be fully aware of a justifier at every moment one holds a belief and as soon as the justifying evidence, memory, or experiences would slip one's mind (perhaps even when sleeping), the belief would no longer be justified. This would mean that most of our beliefs would not be justified. Conversely, if one wants to hold on to epistemic revisionism, strong access internalism

5 For an overview of this debate, see e.g., George Pappas (2017).

6 Laurence Bonjour (1985, ch. 4) presupposed this kind of view in his objection against foundationalism.

7 William Alston (1989, 212–213) shows that a number of philosophers have held such a position.

would be implausible. Hence, strong access internalism is only plausible if one is an epistemic conservative.

However, if it is the case that many epistemic revisionists do not have an issue with being committed to weaker forms of access internalism or to versions of externalism, is revisionism then not the most plausible position to take? In some sense this is an endorsement of the plausibility of epistemic conservatism over epistemic revisionism, since from the perspective of the subject, the belief is held in the absence of a particular justifier of which the subject is aware and hence, there is no need to stop holding on to the belief unless there is some special reason to do so. In fact, if the subject applies the principle of epistemic revisionism to his beliefs, he would have to stop holding on to a great number of beliefs that are justified according to the weaker form of access internalism and versions of externalism, unless he were to become aware of the justifiers, which would bring us back to strong access internalism. Hence, from the perspective of the subject, epistemic revisionism is problematic no matter the position adopted on awareness.

Nonetheless, one might argue that the subject's perspective is not relevant for justification itself if one only considers a more objective perspective relevant. Is epistemic revisionism then the preferred position to take? It seems to me that, at best, the epistemic conservative and epistemic revisionist positions are *prima facie* equivalent. The aim of both positions is to make a selection between beliefs that have a specific justifying feature and those that lack this feature. The epistemic revisionist does this by identifying the justifier, such as evidence in favour of a given belief. Epistemic conservatism does this by identifying defeaters, such as evidence counting against a belief. *Prima facie* both positions can be taken and both lead to a selection of justified beliefs. However, the downside of epistemic revisionism is not only that one cannot be committed to strong access internalism, but also that it is implausible from the subject's perspective. Since epistemic conservatism does not have this downside, it is a more plausible position than epistemic revisionism. Of course, the revisionist could reply that according to the literature, it seems that there are no plausible versions of epis-

temic conservatism, whereas there are many theories and principles of epistemic justification that (implicitly) assume epistemic revisionism and hence, ultimately, revisionism is more plausible. However, in this dissertation I will argue that many arguments against various versions of epistemic conservatism do not hold, that a plausible version of epistemic conservatism can be formulated, and hence that conservatism might be preferred over revisionism.

1.5 What Is Justification in Epistemic Conservatism?

As I hope the above discussion demonstrates, epistemic conservatism has sufficient promise to warrant serious thought. However, before evaluating the various versions of conservatism, a number of clarifications on justification and its relation to epistemic conservatism are in order.

1.5.1 Epistemic Appraisal: Justification, Rationality, and Presumption in Its Favour

There is disagreement on what kind of epistemic appraisal is acquired through epistemic conservatism. In the literature, it is claimed that conservatism produces justification for a belief (McCain 2008, 186), rational belief (Foley 1983), or a presumption in favour of a given belief (Chisholm 1982, 14; Kvanvig 1989, 152). Whilst various authors have argued that there is no real difference between justification and rationality in epistemology (BonJour 1985, 39; Cohen 1984, 283; Fumerton 1995, 19; Huemer 2001, 22; Wedgewood 2012, 280), still others argue that there is a distinction between them (Audi 2011, 325). Roderick Chisholm (1982, 8) suggests that a belief that has a presumption in its favour is a degree of justification, whereas Jonathan Kvanvig (1989, 143) sees it as a degree of rationality for a given belief. Justification is an evaluative concept considered essential for knowledge. Thus, when a belief is justified it is in a right standing with respect to knowledge. In the so-called “justified true belief” analysis of knowledge, justification is the condition that marks the difference between knowledge and mere true belief. Mere true belief is considered to be insufficient for knowledge because the belief is not grounded in anything. It is considered counterintuitive

that true beliefs that we just happen to have—e.g., through lucky guesses or chance—would count as knowledge. Hence, justification is proposed as the “bridge” between knowledge and true belief. However, what it means for a belief to be justified remains controversial and some epistemologists even go as far as to argue that there is no property of beliefs that can be identified by the concept of “justification” (Alston 2005, 11).

Nonetheless, in the context of this dissertation, I think it is useful to see the outcome of the epistemic evaluation in terms of justification because the concept is so widely used in contemporary debates in epistemology. By understanding conservatism as a principle of justification, it will be easier to connect conservatism to theories of justification, which, as I will show below, is important for understanding the importance of conservatism. Hence, I will use epistemic appraisals such as “rational”, “reasonable”, and “having a presumption in its favour” as referring to (a degree of) justification.

1.5.2 Belief Formation and Maintenance

In the context of justification, a review of current literature reveals various distinctions. However, there is one relevant distinction that is noticeable by its near-absence, namely the distinction between the justification of belief formation and that of belief maintenance. At first glance this might seem like an intuitive distinction: every belief we have was formed at some point in time and if we do not maintain it, it is lost. However, the distinction is only relevant if what it means for a belief to be justified could be different for belief formation than for belief maintenance, for example because different conditions for justification obtain. If one has a conception of justification in which the conditions for a belief to be justified will necessarily obtain for both belief formation and maintenance, the distinction becomes irrelevant. In the light of this, epistemic conservatism can be seen as a principle that offers a solution in cases where the justifier for justified belief maintenance could be different from the justifier for justified belief formation. The following matrix might be helpful in understanding this distinction:

		Belief formation	
		Justified	Unjustified
Belief maintenance	Justified	I	II
	Unjustified	III	IV

When the conditions for justification are necessarily fulfilled for both belief formation and belief maintenance, the theory will always take position I or IV in the matrix. For example, a simple version of evidentialism might say that a belief can only be justifiably formed if and only if there is (or a person has) sufficient evidence and similarly a belief can only be justifiably maintained if and only if there is (or a person has) sufficient evidence. So if there is (or one has) sufficient evidence, then necessarily the belief is justifiably formed and maintained (position I). Conversely, if there is not (or one has not) sufficient evidence, then necessarily the belief is unjustifiably formed and maintained (position IV). However, I think there are various theories of justification in which the conditions for justification are not necessarily fulfilled for both belief formation and maintenance, and that position III can be a possible outcome for a theory of justification. For example, a simple version of reliabilism might say that a belief is justifiably formed if and only if the belief is the result of a reliable belief-forming process, but does not say anything about how a belief is justifiable formed. Moreover, I think that most theories of justification actually have different justifiers for the justification of

belief formation and belief maintenance. Many theories, for example, rely on memory in order for their belief maintenance to be justified. As the discussion on lost evidence and memory above demonstrates, a theory of justification might have a justifier for belief formation that is unproblematic, but runs into trouble with the justifier for belief maintenance. Such theories might end up in position III in the matrix and are thus in need of a principle of justification of belief maintenance in order to explain how someone's current set of beliefs can be considered justified. The need for such a principle is related to the distinction between internalist and externalist justification. In section 1.5.4, I will elaborate on what kind of theories are liable to appear in position III. I will also explain how epistemic conservatism can function as a principle of justification in theories that currently cannot account for the justification of belief maintenance.

Position II in the matrix, where one is justified in maintaining a belief, but unjustified in acquiring that belief, is especially interesting for conservatism since conservatism seems to be an example of a principle that could lead to this outcome. Some of the intuitive implausibility of conservatism might stem from the idea that conservatism justifies beliefs that have been formed in unjustified ways. For example, many people would say that we do not get justified beliefs by jumping to conclusions, hallucinations, or wishful thinking. Yet, if there are no defeaters, conservatism seems to say that a person is justified in maintaining such a belief and hence, if we look at someone's current set of beliefs, both those that were formed in a justified manner and those that were formed in an unjustified manner would be equally justified to be maintained. The implication is that as soon as one has formed a belief and there are no defeaters for that belief, the belief is justified, and the justification of belief formation is no longer relevant for having a justified belief. The conservative can respond in two ways: 1) let justification of belief formation be a necessary condition for justified belief maintenance; or 2) accept the limitations and argue that such beliefs are justified nonetheless. Option 2) means that a belief without justification for its formation can be justified such that this belief itself can be used to justify other beliefs. Since it is not based on another belief, such a belief can function

as a foundational belief and hence epistemic conservatism could function as a form of foundationalism, or at least add a set of foundational beliefs to other sets of foundational beliefs. In chapter 8, I will argue that epistemic conservatism can accept the limitations and function as a foundationalist principle of justification. However, for the evaluation of the plausibility of various versions of epistemic conservatism, one need not accept option 2.

1.5.2 Normative and Descriptive Justification

Justification can either be normative or descriptive. Traditionally, epistemology is conceived as a normative practice in which the role of a theory of justification is to determine which beliefs we ought, or are allowed, to hold. However, Willard V.O. Quine (1969, 69–90) famously argued that epistemology should be naturalised and thus should become “a chapter in psychology”, meaning that epistemology is the discipline in which we describe and explain epistemological phenomena, such as beliefs and their relationship with reality, using empirical sciences. Epistemic conservatism seems to suggest that we ought or are allowed to continue to hold the beliefs we happen to have unless we have some reason to doubt them—a normative principle. However, if it is normative, one would expect it to tell us something about whether we should believe something or not; it should give us some guidance in our doxastic practices.

Alvin Goldman (1980) calls this “the regulative function” of epistemic justification as opposed to “the theoretical function” (28–29). The latter is a function in which one tries to determine whether a belief is justified without making a prescription about what to believe. Goldman gives as an example a form of reliabilism in which a belief is justified if its causal ancestry consists of reliable belief-forming processes. This form of reliabilism takes the fact that one has a belief as its starting point and evaluates whether it can be considered justified, however, it does not offer advice to those faced with a choice of multiple propositions. Goldman argues that epistemologists have been interested, first, in the conditions for knowledge—justification being one of them—and second, in doxastic decision principles (DDPs). DDPs, Goldman suggests, can be

seen as a function in which the inputs are the conditions of cognisers (in the form of beliefs or memories) and the outputs are prescriptions about what doxastic attitudes to adopt or retain (28–29). According to him, “the aim of specifying a class of inputs and a correct DDP is to provide a theory of justification [in the regulative function]” (Goldman 1980, 31).

Can epistemic conservatism offer accurate guidance on what kind of doxastic attitudes we should acquire? The following example by Richard Fumerton (2007) would suggest not:

Now consider the person who is genuinely puzzled as to whether or not he should believe that a God exists. Isn't there something very odd about the following advice. Believe that God exists if you find yourself believing [...] that God exists. Disbelieve that God exists if you find yourself disbelieving [...] that God exists. (77)

This example, however, is missing a crucial element of conservatism, namely, its defeat condition. So, the proper conservative advice would be that one should believe God exists if one finds oneself believing that God exists and has no defeater for that belief. Still, it is unlikely that a missionary thinks this is the best advice he can give to the tentative agnostic. Conservatism does seem to have a limitation here. Nonetheless, this does not mean that conservatism does not give any advice at all. Indeed, Fumerton (2007) thinks that the “epistemic conservative is just urging us to ‘trust our cognitive instincts’ in the absence of countervailing evidence” (78). Moreover, Goldman’s (1980, 46–47) own view on what constitutes a correct DDP takes a radical form of doxastic voluntarism—that one is completely free to directly choose the beliefs one has—to be false, meaning that the regulative function of justification should not be understood as a direct choice of what to believe. Hence, the fact that it is not possible to give advice about what to believe in conservatism is not a barrier to it being a normative principle of justification.

1.5.3 *Prima Facie and Ultima Facie Justification*

The difference between prima facie and ultima facie justification is important for epistemic conservatism. Prima facie justification can be understood as justification that prevails (becomes ultima facie justification) unless it is defeated (Audi 2011, 28). Thomas Senor (1996) offers the following example:

Alice looks across the quad (in good light) and sees in the distance a person she takes to be her colleague Ed. She comes to believe that she sees Ed. However, Alice also (justifiably) believes that Ed is in France and will not return to the U.S. for another six months. (551)

Alice's belief is prima facie justified because it is well-grounded (because it is based on visual experience), but it fails to be ultima facie justified because of the defeating belief Alice holds. It is thus defeasibility that marks the difference between prima and ultima facie justification.

According to Senor (1996), the distinction between prima and ultima facie justification should not be understood as a temporal or sequential claim. He states:

it is tempting to understand prima facie justification to be that which the agent has before the justification for the belief is defeated or that which one has until one's evidence gathering is complete. But this is to misunderstand the nature of the distinction. (Senor 1996, 554, emphasis in original)

In Alice's case this means that, as soon as she formed the belief that she sees Ed, her belief that she sees Ed is prima facie justified, but at the same time this belief is ultima facie justified. Senor (1996) argues that prima facie justification can also be understood as "ceteris paribus justification"—a belief is justified "other things being equal" (554). He argues that "what distinguishes prima facie from ultima facie justification isn't usefully put as the former's being justification 'on the first look' but rather justification 'other things being equal'" (554).

Defeasibility is indispensable for epistemic conservatism. Without it, conservatism would judge every belief to be justified, rendering the concept useless. All beliefs that we have are *prima facie* justified according to conservatism and hence defeaters are the only way to render a belief unjustified. Hence, conservatism can be seen as making the most radical epistemic use of defeaters. However, in Senor's example the *prima facie* justification for Alice's belief that she sees Ed came from a visual experience—that is, it was grounded in something else. However, where does the *prima facie* justification in conservatism come from?

If one understands conservatism as a way to explicate justification for belief maintenance even if a belief is unjustifiably formed, then *prima facie* justification can only stem from the fact that a person has the belief. Clearly, this presents a challenge (taken up in chapter 8) for the epistemic conservative, since it radically claims that every belief is *prima facie* justified. Conversely, if one understands conservatism to be a principle that can only give justification for belief maintenance if a belief was already justifiably formed (by some other justificatory principle), then the *prima facie* justification derives from the justification of belief formation. For example, if a belief was justifiably formed on the basis of evidence, then this justifier provides the *prima facie* justification for belief maintenance. Of course, if the evidence remains available in such a way that at every moment it can justify the belief, there is no need for conservatism. Hence, the justifier only provides *prima facie* justification for conservatism in case the justifier is itself no longer available. This leads us to the distinction between internalism and externalism, which I examine in the next section.

1.5.4 Internalist and Externalist Justification

A fundamental distinction in epistemology is that which exists between internalism and externalism. In internalism, the elements that are necessary for justification are internal to a person—they are comprised of mental states that are consciously available to a person. Examples of such states are beliefs, experiences, or memories. In contrast, in externalism, relevant factors for justification might also be external to the

person—they are states in the world outside of one’s mental state. Since externalism is considered the denial of internalism, conceptions of justification in which the justifier is partially internal and partially external are usually called externalist theories.⁸

Epistemic conservatism is a principle that can afford belief maintenance justification, however, there are theories of justification in which the justification of belief maintenance functions properly and such theories have no need for conservatism. Externalist theories will likely have an external justifier for both belief formation and belief maintenance. Taking process reliabilism as an example, this theory claims that the fact that a belief has been formed by a reliable process is sufficient for its justification.⁹ It is easy to see that a reliable process can justify both belief formation and belief maintenance. For example, the belief that “there is a tree in the garden” can be reliably formed by the process of seeing the tree in the garden, which causes one to form that belief. The belief can be justifiably maintained as long as there is a causal link between the belief as one has formed it at some point in time. Note that the belief is not justified because one has the mental state of remembering the belief, but because of the fact that one’s current belief is caused by a reliable memory, which in turn is causally linked to the initial reliable belief-forming process.

A more radical form of externalism might claim that the justifier for belief formation and belief maintenance are the same. For example, a theory that would maintain that one’s beliefs are justified because they are caused by God and one would stop being justified in holding these beliefs if God stops causing them, then God causing one’s beliefs is the justifier for both acquiring and maintaining those beliefs. However, it is also possible that the external factor for the justification of belief formation is not the same as the external factor for belief maintenance. For example, if I am justified in believing that there is a tree in the garden

8 For an overview of the discussion, see for example Kornblith (2001).

9 Alvin Goldman might be the most influential proponent of reliabilism and has produced various versions of it (see Goldman 1967, 1979b, and 1989).

because the formation of that belief was due to my reliable visual perception of it, when I avert my gaze from the tree, I am still justified in maintaining the belief because of the reliability of my memory. Although in this example justified belief formation due to reliable visual perception is a necessary condition for justified belief maintenance, it is not sufficient. If the justifier for belief maintenance is problematic, there might be a place for conservatism to ensure that the externally justified belief formation can be maintained by conservative justification.

An internalist theory of justification might require that the justifier for belief formation and belief maintenance is the same. Take for example a version of evidentialism in which a belief is only justified if one has conscious access to sufficient evidence. The same evidence would be required for the justification of belief formation and belief maintenance and hence, as long as one has the required evidence, the conditions for justification of belief formation and maintenance necessarily obtain. However, as mentioned previously, the cognitive limits of humans would significantly limit the number of beliefs that could be justifiably maintained, and most of our beliefs about everyday affairs, science, and other domains could not be justifiably maintained. Internalists are unlikely to be attracted to such a view and thus allow different justifiers for belief formation and belief maintenance. For example, an evidentialist might say that the maintenance of memory beliefs is justified if there is evidence that one's memory is trustworthy. This also means that there might be theories in which the justification for belief formation is unproblematic, but according to which the justification of belief maintenance is troublesome. Conservatism could function as a principle that provides justification for belief maintenance of such theories.

Epistemic conservatism can itself be understood in internalist and externalist ways. Let us look first at *prima facie* justification and then at the defeat condition. Understood as an externalist view, according to conservatism one is *prima facie* justified to maintain a belief because of

the fact that a belief is justifiably formed.¹⁰ No mental state other than the belief itself is required. Understood as an internalist view, a belief is only *prima facie* justified to maintain a belief if S has a mental state that connects the justification of the belief formation to the belief in question—for example, the belief that the target belief was justifiably formed on the basis of evidence. However, such an approach runs the risk of conflating conservatism with other principles of justification, since it is no longer “mere belief” that is the sufficient internal condition for *prima facie* justification. Hence, regarding *prima facie* justification, externalism seems preferable for a conservative.

However, another way of creating an internal connection is by allowing a mental state to function as a defeater. Therefore, *prima facie* a belief could be justified by virtue of the fact that the belief was justifiably formed, but if one becomes aware of the fact that one’s belief was unjustifiably formed, the justification for belief maintenance is defeated. However, conservatism is not necessarily committed to such a view on defeaters. In fact, the distinction between externalism and internalism can also be applied to defeaters. Michael Sudduth (n.d., Introduction), for example, distinguishes between propositional defeaters that “are conditions external to the perspective of the cognizer that prevent an overall justified true belief from counting as knowledge” and mental state defeaters that “are conditions internal to the perspective of the cognizer (such as experiences, beliefs, withholdings) that cancel, reduce, or even prevent justification”. In this way, epistemic conservatism could have an externalist *prima facie* justification and internalist defeaters, but also a *prima facie* externalist justification and externalist defeaters, *prima facie* internalist justification and externalist defeaters, or *prima facie* internalist justification and internalist defeaters.

Whilst I think most versions of conservatism fall into the first category, Jonathan Kvanvig’s (1989) version seems to be the third category:

10 This assumes that justified belief formation is a necessary condition for justified belief maintenance. In chapter 7, I discuss how conservatism can be applied if the justification of belief formation is not a necessary condition for justified belief maintenance.

fully internalist. Since conservatism is usually understood as saying that “mere belief” that is undefeated is justified, externalist *prima facie* justification seems to be the most appropriate. Moreover, if the defeater would be completely external as well, it is unclear what the use of conservatism would be, since it would be only about what beliefs are in fact justifiably formed and what justification is in fact defeated without us being aware of it. Such pure externalism is not helpful in evaluating our beliefs, let alone give us advice on which beliefs we should maintain. Hence, I think it plausible and useful to understand conservatism as having externalist *prima facie* justification and internalist defeaters.

1.5.5 Justification as Activity or Status

Justification can be understood as a property or status of a belief as well as the activity of justifying a belief. The latter is about showing that a belief is justified on the basis of that what renders it justified, whereas the former is the fact that a belief is justified. However, as William Alston (2005, 18) states, in epistemology, these are often confused with each other—for example, by arguing that an infinite regress of beliefs cannot lead to justification because one cannot in fact process an infinite number of beliefs. In such a case, one has shifted from being justified to the activity of justification (Alston 2005, 18). Furthermore, Robert Audi (2011, 2–3) points out that there seems to be no reason to assume that showing a belief to be justified is necessary for a belief to have the property of being justified.

Does this affect conservatism? A first reaction might be that conservatism is aimed at justification as a property of belief. After all, it might be awkward to say that the fact I believe that P shows that P is justified for me.¹¹ However, higher-order epistemic conservatism, such as that espoused by Jonathan Kvanvig (addressed in chapter 4), seems to posit justification as an activity. Moreover, one might construe the defeat condition in epistemic conservatism in such a way that one can also be

11 This also relates to the unwarranted assertion objection discussed in chapter 5, section 5.7.

engaging in the activity of justification, for example if the defeat condition requires one to show that one does not have a defeater for one's belief. Nonetheless, justification in epistemic conservatism is not usually understood as the activity of justification, but rather as the status of a belief.

1.5.6 Propositional and Doxastic Justification

A typical distinction in epistemology exists between propositional and doxastic justification.¹² A belief is propositionally justified if there is a justifier upon which the belief can be based, whereas a belief is doxastically justified if the belief is in fact based on that justifier.¹³ For example, if an accurate clock indicates that it is noon and this clock is within eyesight of a person, then there is propositional justification for the belief that it is noon. If she also looks at the clock, on the basis of which she believes it is noon, then her belief is also doxastically justified.

Therefore, it seems that in epistemic conservatism, propositional and doxastic justification are necessarily the same, since the fact that S believes that P is the justifier upon which the justification is based. Thus, in this instance, the distinction would be of little value. However, in the defeat condition the distinction might be of more value, since one might have a defeater that is itself either propositionally or doxastically justified.

Perhaps epistemic conservatism can provide doxastic justification even though propositional justification comes from another principle of justification. In this case, a belief might be propositionally justified on the basis of reasons, whilst doxastically, the mere fact that it is a belief without a defeater is sufficient. In his defence of infinitism, Peter Klein (2007a, 2007b) appears to depend on this kind of conservatism. Klein has argued that a belief can be propositionally justified by an infinite chain of reasons. However, in order to be doxastically justified for that belief, it seems that one in fact has to base one's belief on an infinite number of mental states—something that is cognitively impossible. Klein's solu-

12 This distinction was first made by Roderick Firth (1978, 217).

13 Note that the relation between the two concepts is controversial and a topic of debate (see e.g., Silva 2015; Turri 2010; Vahid 2016).

tion is that one only has to base one's belief on a reason that is propositionally justified by an infinite chain of reasons if the context requires this. However, as long as the context does not require one to base one's belief on another belief in the chain, the belief is doxastically justified (Klein 2007a, 27–28; 2007b, 6–11). Hence, in Klein's view, it is possible that a belief is doxastically justified without being based on a reason and this doxastic justification is only called into question when the context requires it. In such a context the doxastic justification is defeated unless there is another reason upon which the belief can be based, which itself is doxastically justified without being based on a reason. This seems to be a version of conservatism to me, since it is the mere fact that one holds a belief that makes the belief doxastically justified (albeit defeasible).

1.5.7 Occurrent and Dispositional Beliefs

Regarding beliefs themselves, various types can be distinguished. One distinction is between occurrent and dispositional beliefs. One might say that a belief that is occurrent is on the forefront of one's mind, whereas a belief that is dispositional is not. For example, I currently believe that my coffee cup is empty; it is on the forefront of my mind because I tried to take a sip and found the cup empty. I am fully aware of this at this moment and I am currently undergoing or experiencing this belief. This is an occurrent belief. However, simultaneously, I believe that Amsterdam is the capital of the Netherlands, Mt. Everest is the highest mountain on earth, and that in 1648 the Peace of Münster was signed. These beliefs, however, are not in the forefront on my mind; I was not aware of them until I brought them to the forefront. I am disposed to undergo or experience those beliefs if certain conditions are met, such as being asked about something that is associated with those beliefs or, as it is in this case, trying to come up with examples of things I believe. These are dispositional beliefs.

In the light of the foregoing, I trust it is now clear that occurrent beliefs are those that epistemic conservatism takes to be *prima facie* justified. However, it is not immediately clear if dispositional beliefs can receive the same *prima facie* justification according to epistemic

conservatism. One might be inclined to deny dispositional beliefs such an epistemic appraisal because it is assumed that it is awareness of the believed proposition that is key to the justificatory process. However, defenders of epistemic conservatism have not pushed the point that direct awareness of a believed proposition is a necessary condition. Rather, only the fact that a belief is held seems to be relevant. If it is a fact that a person holds a dispositional belief, this in itself could be sufficient for *prima facie* justification of that belief. Another argument to treat dispositional beliefs differently from occurrent beliefs concerns the *ultima facie* justification within epistemic conservatism. One might argue that one needs to be aware of the believed proposition in order to recognise defeaters of that belief. If one is not in a position to recognise such defeaters, then epistemic conservatism cannot give an *ultima facie* justificatory status and therefore dispositional beliefs cannot be justified through epistemic conservatism. Whilst this is a plausible objection, it does assume that the defeat condition in epistemic conservatism is of a particular internalist kind and, as section 1.5.4 shows, this might not necessarily be the case for epistemic conservatism. Hence, dispositional beliefs should not be categorically excluded from beliefs that fall within the scope of epistemic conservatism, since their exclusion or inclusions depends on the conception of the defeat condition.

1.6 Conclusion

With this chapter I have shown the benefits of epistemic conservatism and therefore the motivation to find a plausible version of it. Such a version might explain some of our intuitions regarding justification, give a plausible account of the justification of memory beliefs and beliefs for which evidence is lost, increase our cognitive efficiency, and avoid the problematic consequences of epistemic revisionism. Moreover, I have shown how various distinctions regarding epistemic justification relate to epistemic conservatism. With this motivation and clarification in place, in the chapters that follow, I will show the criteria required for a plausible version of conservatism and evaluate its various versions.

Chapter 2

Ancient Preliminaries

Some issues in ancient philosophy are so pervasive that they remain a topic of discussion to this day. Agrippa's trilemma is just such an issue, and it is of special interest when discussing epistemic justification.¹⁴ Due to its pervasiveness, the trilemma—also called the regress problem—has been used as a starting point from which to discuss theories of justification (Klein 2008). In this chapter, I do not evaluate the merits of the trilemma itself, nor the possible solutions that have been offered. Rather, I use the trilemma to offer three criteria for the plausibility of a principle of justification upon which most epistemologists can, I think, agree. Hence, at the end of this chapter we have the first building block for evaluating epistemic conservatism.

14 The term Agrippa's trilemma is derived from Sextus Empiricus' discussion of "the five modes of Agrippa" in his "Outlines of Pyrrhonism" (PH I 164–169; Sextus Empiricus 1993). Work by Robert Fogelin (1994, 194–195) shows that the five modes consist of two groups: three modes that together lead to scepticism (the trilemma); and two modes that are intended to provide criteria to sort knowledge from mere opinions.

2.1 Agrippa's Trilemma

The trilemma can be seen as a reiteration of the regress problem originally identified by Aristotle (Klein 2008, 485–486). In epistemology, the regress problem is that which arises when one assumes that a belief can only be justified on the basis of reasons. Yet, on such a basis, justification seems impossible, leading to one of three scenarios, all of which seem equally unsatisfying: 1) an infinite regress of reasons; 2) circular reasoning; or 3) an arbitrary stopping point.¹⁵

Michael Williams (2005) has given a clear description of the trilemma in relation to epistemic justification:

Consider some belief that is (supposedly) justified inferentially: that is, my justification for holding it consists in my having justification to believe some other propositions (propositions that constitute my reasons for believing that P). The question arises: what makes me justified in believing them? [...] There seem to be three possible outcomes:

- (i) The justificatory chain goes on forever.*
- (ii) The justificatory chain stops with a proposition for which I have no justification.*
- (iii) In tracing my justification for justification for justification to believe that P, we are led back to reasons that include my belief that P. (205)*

All three of the above outcomes are problematic. The first leads to an infinite regress of beliefs, which is problematic because, amongst others,

15 In *Posterior Analytics* (I. 3, 72b15–72b24), speaking on the subject of regress, Aristotle states the following: “For the one party, supposing that one cannot understand in another way, claims that we are led back ad infinitum on the grounds that we would not understand what is posterior because of what is prior if there are no primitives; and they argue correctly, for it is impossible to go through infinitely many things. And if it comes to a stop and there are principles, they say that these are unknowable since there is no demonstration of them, which alone they say is understanding; but if one cannot know the primitives, neither can what depends on them be understood simpliciter or properly, but only on the supposition that they are the case. The other party agrees about understanding; for it, they say, occurs only through demonstration. But they argue that nothing prevents there being demonstration of everything; for it is possible for the demonstration to come about in a circle and reciprocally” (Aristotle 1984, 117).

it requires that a person holds an infinite number of beliefs, which seems impossible. In the second outcome, one simply stops having additional reasons for a certain belief. However, since there is nothing that makes it reasonable for this belief to be justified without itself having a reason in which the belief is grounded, it is arbitrary to stop there. This means that any other belief that is not grounded in a specific reason would also be considered justified. This is problematic because, amongst others, it means that every belief can be considered justified, which seems absurd. If justification is ultimately arbitrary, then we should not consider it justification in the first place and hence, if a chain of reasons arbitrarily stops, then no belief is justified. The third outcome is a form of circular reasoning: the belief is ultimately derived from itself. This is problematic because the reasons in the circle only appear to be reasons for a belief—the belief is, in effect, justified by itself. This in turn means that there is ultimately no reason for the belief in the first place and hence it cannot be justified on the basis of a reason. If these three outcomes are the only possible outcomes for justification, then Agrippa's trilemma leads to the conclusion that no belief can be justified.¹⁶

The trilemma loses its force if one does not share its central assumption that a belief can only be justified if it can be inferred from a reason that is itself a belief. For example, if one thinks that some beliefs can be immediately justified by sensory experience, such as seeing that there is a tree in front of you, then the chain of beliefs stops in a non-arbitrary way. However, even if one does not share the central assumption of the trilemma, it remains informative since the three horns of the trilemma

16 Note that the distinction between justification as a process or activity, and justification as a property or status (mentioned in chapter 1) is not confused here. It is not just because a person cannot show he is justified through an infinite chain of beliefs, but also that the condition for a belief to have the status of being justified cannot be met. Hence, the belief does not have the status or property of being justified. This does assume an internalist account of justification. Internalism seems consistent with Agrippa's trilemma. For a discussion of this, see Van Woudenberg and Meester (2014). Whilst externalist alternatives might be possible, the point here is to derive criteria for a plausible principle of justification. Each of the horns of the trilemma are undesirable and hence should be avoided, even if the trilemma itself can be avoided by resorting to externalism.

are in themselves valid objections against a potential principle of justification, even if the trilemma is not a valid argument for scepticism. Hence, I will use each of the three horns to identify criteria for a plausible principle of justification.

2.2 Infinite Regression

The idea of needing an infinite number of reasons is seen as so clearly problematic by many philosophers that simply arguing that a particular theory of epistemic justification leads to an infinite regress is often enough to discredit a given theory. For example, as Michael Williams (2005, 204–205) points out, defenders of foundationalism¹⁷ and coherentism¹⁸ argue in favour of their positions simply by saying that one must choose between them since basing a theory of justification on an infinite regress is not considered an option.

In recent years, this has changed somewhat due to the emergence of infinitism: a theory of the structure of epistemic justification that claims that infinite chains of unique beliefs can give justification and hence are not necessarily vicious. For example, Peter Klein (1998, 1999, 2008) has defended infinitism on numerous occasions.¹⁹ Although others have picked up on this idea (Aikin 2011; Atkinson and Peijnenburg 2017), it remains a minority view within epistemology.

Yet even infinitists agree that there are vicious infinite regresses that need to be avoided. One reason for this viciousness is that humans have “finite minds” and that it is simply not cognitively possible for humans to hold an infinite number of beliefs.²⁰ Klein, for example, states that “infinitists have been careful not to claim that we must actually produce an infinite series of reasons [qua beliefs]. Rather, they typically say that

17 A theory of the structure of epistemic justification that claims that there are “basic beliefs” that require no inference from other beliefs in order to be justified and therefore can function as the “foundations” of justification.

18 A theory of the structure of epistemic justification that claims that a limited number of beliefs can justify each other if they together form a coherent set of beliefs.

19 For an overview of the discussion, see Klein and Turri (n.d., 2014).

20 I will not consider the question whether infinite chains of *propositions* can give justification or not. For more discussion, see Atkinson and Peijnenburg (2009, 2011), Peijnenburg (2007), and Van Woudenberg and Meester (2014).

we must have an appropriately structured, infinite set of reasons available to us" (Klein and Turri n.d., section 4.a). Hence, even if one considers the infinitist argument convincing, an infinite regress that requires one to hold an infinite number of beliefs is still problematic for a theory of justification. The following criterion expresses this:

Criterion 1: avoiding infinite regression

A plausible principle of justification does not require a person S to believe an infinite number of propositions in order for a belief that P to be justified for S.

2.3 Circularity

That circular reasoning is intuitively problematic soon becomes apparent if one tries to determine the honesty of a man by asking if he is an honest person. As both an honest and a dishonest man could claim they were honest, nothing is to be learnt from this question. Still, whether epistemic circularity is problematic remains a matter of debate amongst philosophers. Different kinds of epistemic circularity have been identified and have been given different appreciations, such as vicious, virtuous, and benign (Greco 2011). William Alston (1993) has even argued that it is impossible to avoid some form of circularity in epistemology, since we must always rely on our epistemic sources—such as perception, memory, introspection, and reasoning—to determine the reliability of those sources. However, he also argues that this is not necessarily a problem for a theory of justification (Alston 1993). Conversely, epistemologists such as Richard Fumerton (1995, 177) and Jonathan Vogel (2000) consider circularity to be problematic for justification. Hence, whether avoiding such "source circularity" is necessary for a plausible theory of justification remains a matter of debate amongst epistemologists. However, a commitment to either position in this discussion does not seem to be a widely held requirement in order for a theory of justification to be taken seriously. Hence, I will not take the avoidance of source circularity as a criterion for a plausible principle of justification.

Another form of epistemic circularity is less controversial, whereas a belief that is justified by a chain of reasons that is ultimately grounded in the belief itself, is clearly problematic. For example, if someone believes that it is 12 o'clock and gives as a reason that it is 12 o'clock when it is noon and they now believe it is noon because it is 12 o'clock, we immediately see there is something wrong with their reasoning. The problem with this kind of circularity is that one ultimately does not really have a reason on the basis of which the belief could be justified. If someone believes the earth to be flat because they believe it is flat, they obviously do not have a reason to believe that. Even if they have more beliefs in that circle—for example, the belief that people would fall off the earth if it were round, and they justify this with reference to their belief that the earth is flat—then, ultimately, they will not have given a reason for holding their belief that the earth is flat. Hence, a circle of reasons cannot explain why a belief is justified. It gives the appearance of inferential justification, but on closer inspection it does not yield any real result. Therefore, a plausible theory of justification will not allow beliefs to be justified on the basis of a circle of reasons.²¹ I will express this in a criterion as follows:

Criterion 2: avoiding circularity

A plausible principle of justification avoids circularity, such that the belief that P is not justified by a chain of reasons that is grounded in the belief that P itself.

2.4 Arbitrariness

Circularity as described above does not establish justification. This raises the question of how justification for the belief that P can be established. If we cannot give an answer, it seems arbitrary to claim justification for the belief that P. It is arbitrary in the sense that the belief that P could have been unjustified as well. *Ceteris paribus*, person S could have been

21 Note that I am not saying that it is only problematic that a belief cannot be shown to be justified, but rather that a belief cannot *be justified*. In other words, I am talking of justification as a property or status, rather than an activity or process.

justified or unjustified in believing P. This sort of arbitrariness is vicious, since there is nothing that enables us to say that the belief that P is justified rather than unjustified, and hence, any belief might be justified or unjustified—there is no way to tell. The distinction between being justified and not being justified ceases to be a useful distinction. A plausible theory of justification provides this distinction by enabling a person S to differentiate between justified and unjustified beliefs. The following criterion expresses this:

Criterion 3: avoiding arbitrariness

A plausible principle of justification is able to explain the difference between a justified and an unjustified belief.

This way of approaching the viciousness of epistemic arbitrariness might strike some as too minimalistic. Peter Klein (1999, 299–305), for example, defines epistemic arbitrariness as the absence of a reason for a belief, where he understands a reason to be a proposition that is available for a person S to believe. In his evaluation of Klein's analysis of arbitrariness, Coos Engelsma (2017) seems to follow Klein. He argues that Klein's account of epistemic arbitrariness "nicely captures the intuitive idea [...] that a belief avoids arbitrariness when there is an epistemic consideration favouring that belief over its contraries" (Engelsma 2017, 37). The intuition that Engelsma refers to seems to say that in order to avoid arbitrariness, there needs to be something (an epistemic consideration) that allows a person to distinguish beliefs from each other in a way that is epistemically satisfying or responsible. It seems to me that epistemic justification, independent of which theory of justification one chooses, is the most obvious candidate to allow us to distinguish between those beliefs that are epistemically satisfying and those that are not. Hence, I think that criterion three captures the intuition to which Klein and Engelsma refer.

However, Klein and Engelsma seem to assume that justification can only come from inference and that hence arbitrariness can only be avoided by inferring a belief from a reason. This means that any theory of justification that claims that justification can come from something other than

inference would allow beliefs to be justified arbitrarily. Incidentally, only epistemic infinitism (defended by Klein) and some version of coherentism would seem to qualify, since only those theories could exclusively use inferences to provide justification. Interestingly, they do not seem to offer a reason why arbitrariness can only be avoided by offering reasons for a belief, even though we can think of other potential candidates to argue why a belief is justified or not: sense-experiences and self-evidence are clear and intuitive examples of this. It seems Klein's definition of epistemic arbitrariness is exactly the same as the necessary and sufficient condition for an individual belief to be justified on his theory of justification or, in other words, being inferred from a different proposition that is itself justified (Klein 1999, 2008; Klein and Turri, n.d.). This amounts to saying that a belief is arbitrary if it is not inferentially justified and the accusation that a theory of justification allows for beliefs to be arbitrary is simply saying that this theory of justification is not infinitism or some version of coherentism. This approach is undesirable because it unnecessarily blurs the discussion on justification. If the criteria and the theories under investigation are equated, it becomes unclear what the functions of the criteria are. The minimalistic way in which this criterion is formulated leaves open what it is that prevents a belief from being justified arbitrarily—something I think better captures the intuition to which Engelsma refers. A theory of justification only allows arbitrariness if there are beliefs that are justified without an explanation why such a belief is justified as opposed to unjustified.

2.5 Conclusion

Agrippa's trilemma has already given us the first criteria for evaluating the principle of epistemic justification, including epistemic conservatism. Although one might formulate more criteria on the basis of the trilemma, I have limited myself to those that I think arouse the least controversy. These criteria can be seen as the minimal demands that can be placed on any theory of justification. In the next chapter, the starting point for addressing the first version of epistemic conservatism I will consider is the work of Roderick Chisholm.

Chapter 3

The Genesis of Conservatism: Chisholm and Foley

Epistemic conservatism is a relatively novel idea in philosophy, Roderick Chisholm being one of the first philosophers to give the idea serious thought.²² The term itself was coined by Richard Foley (1983, 165) when he was arguing against Chisholm's view. Ever since Foley's critique, epistemic conservatism has been considered implausible by many. In this chapter, I present Chisholm's version of epistemic conservatism and Foley's criticism of it. I then evaluate Foley's objections and distil an additional criterion for the plausibility of a principle of justification from them. Finally, I evaluate Chisholm's version with the use of the criteria for a plausible version of conservatism, concluding that indeed, his version is not plausible.

22 Chisholm (1982a, 14) claims that the principle can already be found with Carneades according to Sextus Empiricus (1993) in *Against the Logicians* (Outlines of Pyrrhonism, II 95:176–177). However, it is not clear from this text whether this really refers to mere belief or to some form of defeasible experience from which a belief can be reasonably derived.

3.1 Chisholm's Conservatism

In his paper "A version of Foundationalism", Chisholm (1982a, 3–32) formulates a theory of epistemic foundationalism. For Chisholm, the concept of "epistemic justification" is, at least in part, an expression of the following concepts:

Having some presumption in its favour;

Being acceptable;

Beyond reasonable doubt;

Being evident;

Being certain. (8)

Each of these concepts shows a degree of justification: being certain is the highest degree and having some presumption in its favour is the lowest (8). Chisholm has formulated two principles that together can be considered his version of conservatism.²³ According to Chisholm, a belief has a presumption in its favour when it is more reasonable to hold it than its negation and a belief is acceptable when it is not more reasonable to withhold it than to believe it (Chisholm 1982a, 8).²⁴

First, I consider the principle that says that "anything we find ourselves believing may be said to have some presumption in its favour—provided it is not explicitly contradicted by the set of other things we believe" (Chisholm 1982a, 14). He further states that "the principle may be thought of as an instance of a more general truth—that it is reasonable to put our trust in our own cognitive faculties unless we have some positive ground for questioning them" (Chisholm 1982a, 14). Here is a statement of this principle that I shall refer to as Chisholm's (1982a, 14) first conservative principle:

23 Note that Chisholm himself never refers to these principles as epistemic conservatism.

24 In a later work, the third edition of *The Theory of Knowledge*, the expression "having some presumption in its favour" seems to have been replaced by the term "the probable", which is defined as follows: S is more justified in believing P than in believing the negation of P (Chisholm 1989, 10). Moreover, Chisholm (1989, 16) seems to have rebranded "acceptability" to "epistemically in the clear", which he defines as: S is not more justified in withholding P than in believing P.

C1: *If S holds a belief that is not explicitly contradicted by any conjunction of beliefs that S holds, then the belief is justified to the degree that it has some presumption in its favour for S.*²⁵

C1 states that epistemic justification (qua having some presumption in its favour) can come from the absence of a defeater in the form of contradiction with another belief that a person holds. For Chisholm (1982a, 14), a belief is only explicitly contradicted by another belief if the latter entails the negation of the former. So, the belief that P is contradicted by the belief that Q if Q entails that $\neg P$. For example, the belief that it is raining today is contradicted by the belief that there are no clouds that can lead to precipitation today, because that belief entails that it is not raining today.

Since the principle is very permissive, it seems appropriate that it can only attain the very lowest degree of justification. One can imagine that there are many beliefs that someone can have that are not contradicted by the person's other beliefs. For example, few people will believe that Marie Antoinette did not say "let them eat cake" to the Parisian people, yet we would not consider the belief that Marie Antoinette said that phrase to have a very high degree of justification. So, according to this principle, there will be many beliefs that can attain at least a very low degree of justification. Chisholm (1982a, 15) introduces his second conservative principle to reduce the permissiveness of the first. Beliefs justified by this principle will be justified to the degree of being acceptable. Below is a statement that I shall refer to as his second principle (Chisholm 1982a, 15):

25 The original formulation of Chisholm (1982a) is: "For every x, if x accepts a proposition or state of affairs that is not explicitly contradicted by any conjunction of propositions each such that it is accepted by x, then that proposition has some presumption in its favour for x" (14). Note that "accepting a proposition" can be interpreted as either "S choosing to accept a proposition" or "S happens to accept a proposition" (14). Since Chisholm states that according to the above principle, "anything we find ourselves believing [...] has some presumption in its favour", I think the second interpretation is more favourable (14).

C2: *A belief is justified to the degree that it is acceptable for S if and only if the belief is not disconfirmed by the set of all beliefs that have a presumption in their favour for S.*²⁶

For Chisholm (1982b), confirmation means that “if a proposition *e* tends to confirm a proposition *h*, then anyone who knows *e* to be true has a reason for accepting *h*” (33). Although he elaborates on the notion of confirmation, for our purposes it is sufficient to say that a confirming belief is a belief held by *S* that is evidence for another belief. Disconfirmation therefore means that a belief held by *S* functions as evidence against another belief held by *S*. In C2, only beliefs held by *S* that themselves have some presumption in their favour can serve as evidence against a belief held by *S*. By way of illustration, imagine that *S* believes that it will rain today, and does not have any beliefs that entail the contradiction of this belief. The belief is uncontradicted and has some presumption in its favour. If none of the other beliefs *S* has that have a presumption in their favour disconfirm the belief that it will rain today, then the belief that it will rain today is acceptable. However, if *S* believes that she has not heard any raindrops hitting the skylight all day and she believes that the weather forecast for today stated that it would stay dry, then the evidence confirms (but does not entail) that it is not raining today, and the belief that it rains today is disconfirmed and will not be acceptable according to Chisholm’s principles. Note that this does not mean that the belief does not still have a presumption in its favour, since the evidence does not entail the contradiction of the belief. Together, these two principles make up Chisholm’s conservatism and form the main subject of Richard Foley’s objection to conservatism as discussed below.

26 Chisholm’s (1982a) original formulation is as follows: “For every *x*, and every property *H*, the direct attribution of *H* is acceptable for *S* if and only if it is not disconfirmed by the set of all those properties having some presumption in their favour” (15). Here, due to his view of what a belief is, Chisholm uses the notion of direct attribution of a property *H* instead of a proposition. However, he states, at least for the purposes of his essay, that the two ways of understanding belief can be used interchangeably (Chisholm 1982a, 14).

3.2 Foley's Criticism

In his 1983 article "Epistemic Conservatism", Richard Foley (1983) argues that epistemic conservatism, in particular Chisholm's version, should be dismissed as implausible. Foley considers Chisholm's formulation as a weak version of epistemic conservatism. Stronger versions of conservatism imply that "whatever a person happens to believe, it is rational for the person to believe it" (Foley 1983, 172).²⁷ This strong, or pure, conservatism is obviously implausible since it entails that every belief one has is by definition justified and hence it is impossible to have unjustified beliefs. However, we know that at least some beliefs are unjustified, hence a principle that does not allow for unjustified beliefs is very implausible. Foley (1983, 165) points out that Chisholm's formulation is not a strong version of conservatism because the presumption in its favour is limited only to those beliefs that are not explicitly contradicted by the set of beliefs a person already has. Note that Foley uses the following formulation of Chisholm's conservatism: "Anything we find ourselves believing may be said to have some presumption in its favour—provided it is not explicitly contradicted by the set of other things we believe" (Foley 1983, 165). As we have seen above, this is only one of Chisholm's two principles. However, if the first principle turns out to be implausible, then the second principle is also in trouble, as it is built on the first: undermining the first principle necessarily undermines the second.

Although Foley (1983) acknowledges that having a presumption in its favour is a very weak form of justification, he argues that Chisholm's principle still leads to the counterintuitive result that a belief that is unreasonable but not explicitly contradicted is still merited with some level of justification. Foley does not give an example, but I imagine that beliefs about the Dutch weather could fall into this category. If a person believes that he can go outside in the Netherlands on a November day in shorts without getting cold, but does not believe that it being a November

27 Note that Foley use the terms "rational", "warrant", and Chisholm's concepts of justification, interchangeably. Since he refers to Chisholm's work, I take it that in the context of this paper, these terms all refer to justification.

day entails that it is too cold for shorts, this person's belief has some presumption in its favour according to Chisholm's principles. This would mean that despite this being a clearly unreasonable belief, Chisholm's principle judges this belief to be somewhat justified and, Foley (1983, 173) argues, since people often hold beliefs the negations of which are more reasonable to hold, conservatism will not help us ascertain which beliefs are reasonable and which are not.

Foley (1983, 173) argues that the problem with Chisholm's principle is that it is presented as being about *ultima facie* instead of *prima facie* justification. Thus, in a *prima facie* sense, it can be said that there is some justification for a proposition simply by being believed and not explicitly contradicted. However, *ultima facie* the negation of the *prima facie* justified belief may turn out to be more reasonable, and thus the *prima facie* justification has been lost or defeated. Chisholm's principle is too strong, Foley (1983, 173) argues, because it is not a mere *prima facie* principle of justification.

This is surprising, not least as Chisholm's principle does seem to be about *prima facie* justification. After all, one could read his principle as saying: a belief has *prima facie* a presumption in its favour, but *ultima facie* it only has a presumption in its favour if it is not explicitly contradicted by the set of beliefs *S* already has. Perhaps the problem is that Chisholm has a stratified understanding of justification and that all beliefs that are not explicitly contradicted by the set of beliefs *S* already has have a presumption in their favour, even if at a higher degree of justification—that of Chisholm's second principle—some of those beliefs are "disconfirmed". This would mean that both the first degree of justification (having some presumption in its favour) and the second degree of justification (being acceptable) have their own *prima* and *ultima facie* justification, which seems to conflict with the idea that *ultima facie* justification cannot be defeated because it is already "all things considered". Yet, once again, this does not seem to be a fatal objection to conservatism, since one can imagine a version of conservatism in which a defeat condition that is required for a higher degree of justification can also defeat any positive epistemic status merited at the lower degree

of justification. This would imply that the lower degree of justification is not *ultima facie* justification, but rather some kind of intermediary status—not justified “at first sight” or “all things considered”, but rather “some things considered”. Strictly speaking, Foley might be right about Chisholm’s version of conservatism, but it seems to be a problem that is due to Chisholm’s particular formulation, rather than to the guiding intuition behind conservatism itself.

Foley’s (1983) central objection to conservatism is that, even if conservatism were to properly employ the *prima facie/ultima facie* distinction, it would still lead to counterintuitive results because it is committed to the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*: “I have no evidence in favour of not-h so it must be rational for me to accept h as true” (175). Foley illustrates conservatism’s commitment to this fallacy by means of the following. Consider, he urges, the proposition “there is an even number of grains of sand on the beach at Whispering Sands” (175). Since a person has neither any particular reason to believe that there is an odd number of grains of sand on the beach, nor that there are an even number, it would be reasonable for S to withhold judgment on this proposition (174). Yet, if S happens to believe the proposition, then, Foley reasons, holding that belief is justified according to conservatism. In Chisholm’s version, the belief would be acceptable since there is no belief that has a presumption in its favour and that disconfirms the belief that “there is an even number of grains of sand on the beach at Whispering Sands” (175). However, as Foley states, “it is just the sort of proposition on which we ought to withhold judgment” (175). Since conservatism is not able to identify the proposition as something upon which we ought to withhold judgment, conservatism fails as a principle of justification (Foley 1983). For Foley (1983), the problem is as follows:

[T]he lack of disconfirming evidence by itself cannot be used to raise the weak epistemic warrant which is bestowed upon all believed propositions whatsoever by a conservative principle. More specifically, the lesson is that the weak warrant bestowed upon believed propositions by a prin-

principle of epistemic conservatism can be raised only by additional positive support for those propositions. (176)

I think, however, that this description of the problem is incorrect. The problem with the Whispering Sands example is that the absence of confirmation of “there being an odd number of grains of sand” does not make clear why S should believe the proposition that there is an even number of grains. Moreover, it does not seem to allow the option that a person should suspend judgment when a proposition is believed. It seems to be arbitrary that this particular belief is justified, but the negation, which seems equally believable, is not. Although the conservative might answer that it is not arbitrary because one proposition is in fact believed and the other proposition is not, in such cases, the intuitive uneasiness persists.

Foley (1983, 176) suggests that the problem lies in the absence of positive evidence. However, claiming that positive evidence is needed to “raise the weak epistemic warrant” is a particular solution to the problem of arbitrariness that is found in the Whispering Sands example, namely, having positive evidence to undo the arbitrariness—evidentialism. Foley seems to assume that any version of conservatism is implausible because it is not evidentialism. Yet, whilst it is clear that the Whispering Sands example poses a problem for epistemic conservatism, the problem is not that conservatism does not require positive evidence to prevent the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*. Rather, in this context, there is a problem of arbitrariness underlying this fallacy and the epistemic conservative, therefore, needs to come up with a solution that does not rely on an evidentialist solution.

In these cases, we can speak of a higher-order problem of arbitrariness in which the difference between passing judgment (believing P or \neg P) and suspending judgment (neither believing P nor \neg P) is not explained. It is a higher-order problem of arbitrariness in which a principle of justification fails to explain why it is even possible to judge whether to believe P or \neg P rather than simply suspending judgment on the proposition altogether. An evidentialist example of a belief that cannot be judged would be the belief that there is an unobservable planet far away in the universe. Since

it is not possible to gather evidence about such a planet, it is not possible to judge whether the evidence says something about this belief and hence judgment about the proposition should be suspended. In order to evaluate various versions of conservatism regarding this issue, I will take the avoidance of this form of arbitrariness to be an additional criterion for evaluating principles of justification.

Criterion 4: avoiding the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*

A plausible principle of justification avoids arbitrariness as a consequence of the fallacy ad ignorantiam. This means that the principle explains the difference between passing judgment and suspending judgment.

After dismissing Chisholm's conservatism, Foley (1983) considers an even weaker version of epistemic conservatism in which beliefs that have some presumption in their favour can give an additional degree of justification to an already existing degree of justification. This means that when a proposition P is barely just below a particular threshold for a degree of justification, then according to conservatism, simply believing that proposition can increase the degree of justification above the threshold, even though nothing else has changed in the situation. For Foley (1983, 176–177) this result is highly counterintuitive because a proposition can be either reasonable or unreasonable only because of the propositional attitude that a person holds towards that proposition.

Foley (1983) does not go into detail about what it is exactly that makes it counterintuitive, however, he assumes that the simple fact that a person starts believing a proposition does not affect the way the belief should be evaluated. Foley states that the implausibility of any kind of epistemic conservatism comes from the fact that conservatism implies that “simply by being believed a proposition acquires some kind of favourable epistemic status which in some way alters what is required to make that proposition or some other proposition rational for the person to regard as true” (179; emphasis in original). This means that, for example, the proposition that the moon is made of Gouda cheese (something I do

not believe) and the proposition the moon is made of rock and metal (something I do believe) would be equally reasonable—or unreasonable, according to Foley—unless there is something else, such as evidence, that would make one of the two propositions more or less reasonable to regard as true. The fact that I am convinced that the moon is not made of cheese does not tell us anything about whether the proposition is reasonable. Hence, Foley’s objection boils down to the intuition that the fact that someone believes a proposition is completely irrelevant for the epistemic evaluation of that proposition (Foley 1983, 197).

This objection has been reiterated as a sufficient objection to render conservatism implausible, albeit without much further explanation, by authors such as Christensen (1994), Vahid (2004), and Kvanvig (1989). However, this is surprising, since it is exactly this assumption that is challenged by conservatism. Hence, this is not an objection, but rather an issue that is in contention.

3.3 The Plausibility of Chisholm’s Conservatism

In this section I use the criteria for a plausible principle of justification formulated thus far to evaluate Chisholm’s conservatism as expressed by principles C1 and C2. Although Chisholm’s version does not fail because of Foley’s objections, it is nonetheless problematic.

3.3.1 Criterion 1: avoiding infinite regression

A plausible principle of justification does not require a person S to believe an infinite number of propositions in order for a belief that P to be justified for S.

At first glance, Chisholm’s conservative principles easily satisfy the first criterion. These principles state that a target belief is epistemically justified qua being acceptable without the need for any other reasons, let alone an infinite number of them. Moreover, regarding C1, it is clear that if a target belief is not explicitly contradicted by the set of beliefs one already has, then the target belief has some presumption in its favour. If it is impossible to hold an infinite number of beliefs, then one simple

does not have an infinite number of beliefs that could form the set of beliefs that contradict the target belief. The same goes for C2: since this addresses a subset of the set of beliefs that are not explicitly contradicted by the beliefs one already has, it is not necessary to have an infinite number of these uncontradicted beliefs that do not disconfirm the target belief. In fact, it is (at least theoretically) possible that a person S only has one uncontradicted belief that P that is not disconfirmed by all other uncontradicted beliefs S has and still the belief that P would be justified (acceptable). Clearly, the principles do not require a person to hold an infinite number of reasons. Hence, criterion 1 is satisfied.

3.3.2 Criterion 2: avoiding circularity

A plausible principle of justification avoids circularity such that the belief that P is not justified by a chain of reasons that is grounded in the belief that P itself.

According to Chisholm's first principle C1, a belief that P has some presumption in its favour for S if it is not directly contradicted by the beliefs S already has. The easiest way to see whether this principle is committed to circularity is by making an argument for the justification of the belief that P using this principle. This can be constructed as follows:

1. S holds the belief that P;
2. If $\neg P$ is not entailed by any conjunction of beliefs, not including the belief that P, held by S, then the belief that P has some presumption in its favour for S;
3. The conjunction of beliefs, not including the belief that P, held by S does not entail the belief that $\neg P$;
4. Therefore, the belief that P has some presumption in its favour for S.

Clearly, none of the premises are the same as the conclusion and hence circularity has been avoided. However, is there some hidden premise that would make this argument circular, nonetheless? One might have the

intuition that every belief from the conjunction of beliefs, not including the belief that *P*, needs to have some presumption in its favour. If the belief that *P* is part of the conjunction of beliefs with which none of *S*'s other beliefs should contradict—i.e., therefore having *some presumption in its favour*—then the conclusion is also a premise in the argument and the argument is circular. However, Chisholm does not require that any belief of the existing conjunction of beliefs has some presumption in its favour by virtue of it not being contradicted by a new belief—in this case, the belief that *P*. In other words, if one gains a new belief, the existing beliefs do not need to be reappraised on the basis of the new belief. Therefore, the positive epistemic status of the new belief does not need to be assumed to have a set of beliefs with which the new belief should not be in contradiction with. Hence, circularity is avoided in C1.

Chisholm's C2 is rather similar in structure as C1 and we can construct a similar argument:

1. *S* holds the belief that *P*;
2. If the set of all beliefs having some presumption in their favour for *S*, not including the belief that *P*, does not disconfirm the belief that *P*, then the belief that *P* is acceptable for *S*;
3. The set of all beliefs having some presumption in their favour for *S*, not including the belief that *P*, does not disconfirm the belief that *P*;
4. Therefore, the belief that *P* is acceptable for *S*.

Again, the conclusion is not amongst one of the premises, so circularity is avoided. Equally, one might wonder if there is a hidden premise that assumes the conclusion. This seems especially possible in the case of premise three. However, as soon as one sees that the beliefs in the set of beliefs that have a presumption in their favour are either uncontradicted or not required to be acceptable themselves, then it becomes clear that the conclusion is not assumed. Thus, circularity is also avoided in C2. Therefore, this criterion is satisfied.

3.3.3 Criterion 3: avoiding arbitrariness

A plausible principle of justification is able to explain the difference between a justified and an unjustified belief.

Arbitrariness might very well be the most intuitive and most readily available objection to epistemic conservatism. However, it is not immediately evident that Chisholm's epistemic conservatism suffers from arbitrariness. After all, not just any belief has a presumption in its favour or is acceptable in Chisholm's view. For example, if someone believes that the moon is made of cheese, but also believes that cheese is man-made and the moon is not, then there is an explicit contradiction for the belief that the moon is made of cheese (and hence it does not have a presumption in its favour). In other words, it is possible to differentiate between justified and unjustified beliefs, and this differentiation is explained in Chisholm's conservatism.

However, C1 does seem to be arbitrary regarding which beliefs are the target of the defeaters and which ones are the defeaters themselves. Recall that C1 allows a belief to have some presumption in its favour if it is not explicitly contradicted by the conjunction of beliefs held by S. The question then is what constitutes the first conjunction of beliefs with which S's beliefs should not contradict. The principle does not make clear which set of beliefs is that which additional beliefs should not explicitly contradict in order to have some presumption in its favour. It seems that this set could have just as easily been different. Let us assume we have a set of beliefs about the moon, including that it is made of cheese, and there are a number of beliefs that we have that explicitly contradict the belief that the moon is made of cheese—for example, the beliefs that all cheese is man-made and that humans cannot produce enough cheese to constitute something as large as the moon. How are we to judge which beliefs are explicitly contradicted and which beliefs are used for the contradiction? For example, if the belief that "the moon is made of cheese" is the target of the defeaters, then this belief will be explicitly contradicted and will not lose its prima facie justification. However, if

the belief that “humans cannot produce enough cheese to constitute something as large as the moon”, then that belief will be explicitly contradicted by the beliefs that “the moon is made of cheese” and that “all cheese is man-made”. Consequently, the target belief loses its *prima facie* justification. Chisholm does not offer anything that enables us to say which beliefs should be the target and which should be the defeaters. This is problematic because the initial set of beliefs that have a presumption in their favour are the beliefs that are eligible for higher degrees of justification in Chisholm’s theory. So, if a belief or set of beliefs does not meet the necessary criteria, it will simply be unjustified. Hence, the principle does not avoid arbitrariness. Moreover, since this arbitrariness directly affects which beliefs are justified and which are not, the principle does not satisfy the criterion.

The most straightforward solution is to exclude all beliefs that contradict each other from being justified. Thus, in the example above, both the belief that “the moon is made of cheese” and the belief that “humans cannot make enough cheese to constitute something as large as the moon” should not be justified. However, this solution will exclude beliefs that would have acquired an even higher degree of justification on C2. In other words, the fact that a belief is contradicted by another belief should not be the only consideration for justification. It is possible that there is inductive evidence for a belief such that it should be justified even if this belief itself is contradicted by another belief. Hence, this solution is very implausible.

One might argue that this problem is due to Chisholm’s specific formulation of C2, which takes the uncontradicted beliefs as the set of beliefs that can acquire a higher epistemic status, and that this should simply be rewritten to include all the beliefs a person holds. This means that C1 and C2 are treated as two independent principles—i.e., one can have a belief that does not have a presumption in its favour, but is acceptable. However, this is also problematic because then the hierarchy in degrees of belief becomes meaningless. If a belief is acceptable—i.e., not disconfirmed by evidence—then this would not necessarily mean that it also has a presumption in its favour—i.e., it may be contradicted by another

belief one has. This would create strange situations in which a belief that is explicitly contradicted by another belief, yet not disconfirmed by evidence, has the same epistemic status as a belief that is neither disconfirmed nor explicitly contradicted by the conjunction of a person's other beliefs. The value of not being uncontradicted ceases to exist once one goes up in the justificatory hierarchy, which is counterintuitive and contrary to what Chisholm set out to do.

This means that we cannot allow all beliefs that are contradicted by another belief to be excluded from being justified. Moreover, they clearly cannot be allowed to both be justified, since then all of the beliefs one has would get a positive epistemic status and the principle would not function as a principle to differentiate between justified and unjustified beliefs—it would be arbitrary. Hence, we are back where we started: one set of beliefs needs to be used to contradict another set of beliefs and this latter set will, therefore, not be justified. Yet it seems arbitrary which set of beliefs will be defeated by the other set of beliefs.

Another solution would be to let something else differentiate between the target and the defeating beliefs. A belief that would serve as the defeating belief would have a privileged position because it will not lose its *prima facie* justification due to any contradiction with another belief. One can think of various reasons why a belief could occupy such a privileged position, for example that the beliefs are self-evident, come directly from sense experiences such as seeing and hearing, or are the result of a reliable cognitive process. Whatever it may be, it would have a clear analogy with foundationalism, except that one does not consider such beliefs as foundations for justified beliefs. Rather, they constitute stumbling blocks that prevent a belief from becoming *ultima facie* justified. Therefore, if we have a perception that “the moon does not look cheesy” when we look through a telescope, we could form the belief that “the moon is not cheesy”, which could be used as a belief that another belief should not contradict. As Chisholm does not point us in this direction, this would require an adaptation of his principles. However, in his own work there might be potential candidates for stumbling blocks, such as those beliefs he terms self-presenting (Chisholm 1982a, 9). Irrespec-

tive of what kind of stumbling blocks one would encounter, there is a problem for such an approach.

In C1 the stumbling blocks must be infallible, because if they are fallible, they would exclude beliefs that should not be excluded. For example, if I have the belief that “the moon is yellow” on the basis of seeing the moon as yellow and this is considered a stumbling block, then the belief that “the moon is actually grey” is explicitly contradicted and therefore does not have a presumption in its favour and thus will not be eligible for further consideration in Chisholm’s hierarchy. However, this would be a mistake, since it might very well be that there is some evidence that disconfirms the belief that “the moon is yellow” and that hence, in the context of C2, the belief that “the moon is yellow is disconfirmed” and the belief that “the moon is actually grey” would be justified. It follows that due to the fallibility of the stumbling block, beliefs do not acquire a presumption in their favour, even though they would have been acceptable according to a principle that is higher in the justification hierarchy. Hence, for C1, the stumbling blocks need to be infallible.

However, there seem to be very few candidates for infallible stumbling blocks—self-evident beliefs and logically necessary propositions come to mind. Moreover, it seems that very few beliefs would actually contradict such infallible beliefs. This in turn means that the vast majority of beliefs we have will not be explicitly contradicted by them, meaning that having a presumption in its favour applies to almost every belief. However, this may not be such a problem for Chisholm, as he calls this the lowest degree of justification. A more pressing problem is the fact that, potentially, a lot of beliefs that have a presumption in their favour will actually contradict each other because they are not defeated by a stumbling block. This clearly goes against the original intent of C1 and hence this is not a real solution either.

One might ask if it is C2 that makes Chisholm’s conservatism interesting and plausible. However, the same problem of arbitrariness seems to arise here: which set of beliefs will be disconfirmed by the other set of beliefs? The principle says that a belief acquires a positive epistemic status—being acceptable—if it is disconfirmed by another (set of)

belief(s). However, a belief that is disconfirmed by another belief could just as easily have disconfirmed that other belief. For example, the belief that “white storks can be found on the waterside” is disconfirmed by the beliefs that “winter is coming” and “storks usually migrate south before the winter”. However, at the same time, my belief that “storks usually migrate south before the winter” can be disconfirmed by the conjunction of the beliefs that there are white storks that can be found on the waterside and that “winter is coming”. If one would simply choose one of the two beliefs to be the target of defeat and the other as the defeater, one would arbitrarily allow one belief to be justified and the other not. In order to avoid arbitrariness, either both beliefs would need to be treated equally, or there needs to be something that affords one belief a more privileged position.

If we treat all beliefs that disconfirm each other equally—either all justified or all unjustified—Chisholm’s principle, which seeks to explain the difference between justified and unjustified beliefs, cannot be explained. Moreover, in Chisholm’s hierarchy of justification, there is a non-conservative principle that can deliver the degree of justification: beyond reasonable doubt. This non-conservative principle takes the set of beliefs that are acceptable as the set of beliefs that can acquire the status of being beyond reasonable doubt if the belief is the result of perception (Chisholm 1982a, 21). This means that if we treat all beliefs equally and all those beliefs that are disconfirmed by another belief are not acceptable, then they will also be excluded from acquiring this higher degree of justification, even though there would be many beliefs that would have been justified at this higher level.

The other solution is to have some beliefs which hold a privileged position—the stumbling blocks I mentioned earlier. In this approach, one could allow a set of beliefs to be the beliefs that can disconfirm another belief without itself being disconfirmed by that other belief. It would avoid arbitrariness because there is something epistemologically special about the stumbling blocks. However, even here, the same problem arises as with C1: the stumbling blocks must be infallible in order to prevent excluding beliefs that would be justified at a higher level. Imagine a

fallible stumbling block, such as the belief that “the moon is yellow”, which is privileged because the person sees that the moon is yellow. The belief that “the moon is made of grey rock and metal” is then disconfirmed, which in turn means that it will not be considered for a higher degree of justification, even if it would satisfy the conditions for that higher degree of justification itself. Thus, fallible stumbling block will not do. However, infallible stumbling blocks will not do either because of the nature of disconfirmation: it is evidence for the negation of the disconfirmed belief without it being an explicit contradiction—it is inductive. This makes it possible that a belief that is disconfirmed by an infallible belief could have been justified at a higher level according to the conditions of that degree of justification. Hence, this solution to the problem of arbitrariness is again too costly.

Chisholm’s version of conservatism cannot avoid arbitrariness. This is not to say that all versions of conservatism are implausible and hence it might be possible to rewrite his version in such a way that it would be plausible. This would, however, have to be such a substantial overhaul that we could hardly call it Chisholm’s version of conservatism. Therefore, as such, Chisholm’s version does not satisfy this criterion.

3.3.4 *Criterion 4: avoiding the fallacy ad ignorantiam*

A plausible principle of justification avoids arbitrariness as a consequence of the fallacy ad ignorantiam. This means that the formulation explains the difference between passing judgment and suspending judgment.

In Chisholm’s conservatism, the suspension of judgment seems impossible. If we assume that the contradicting or disconfirming belief is justified in order to function as a defeater, then S either has to believe that P or $\neg P$ and hence cannot believe neither. For example, if S believes that “the number of stars are even” and this belief is contradicted by S’s belief that “the number of stars are odd”, then S would be justified in believing the latter, but unjustified in the former. However, it seems obvious that

in both cases, S should have suspended judgment. Hence, under this assumption, criterion 4 is not satisfied.

If we do not accept this assumption and instead assume that all beliefs that contradict or disconfirm each other are unjustified, then it does seem possible to suspend judgment since S neither believes P nor \neg P. However, this would not capture the difference between cases where both beliefs obviously have the same epistemic status, such as that the number of stars in the universe is either even or odd, and cases in which it is obvious that one belief should be justified whereas the other should be unjustified, such as the belief that “the moon is made of cheese” and the belief that “the moon is constituted of rock and metal”. Therefore, this criterion is not satisfied under both assumptions.

3.4 The Uninterestingness Objection

In the above discussion I examined how Chisholm’s conservatism might avoid arbitrariness, but would then run the risk of delivering epistemically uninteresting results. The suggestion that conservatism is epistemically uninteresting has also been levied by Hamid Vahid (2004): “to the extent that principles of conservatism are epistemically promising, they are not plausible. To the extent that they are plausible, they are not of much epistemic interest” (119). Yet what does it actually mean for a result to be “epistemically uninteresting”?

Vahid (2004) suggests that conservatism can only bring “rationality-from-the-point-of-view-of-the-agent” and that “a conception of rationality that emphasizes the agent’s own perspective [is] a weak and subjective notion of rationality that is not necessarily a good indicator or means to truth” (117). Apparently, a least for Vahid, a result is only interesting if it is a good indicator of, or a means to, the truth—if it achieves, or helps achieve, the truth goal. Indeed, there are various philosophers who object to the truth goal being the only goal, or even being a goal at all (e.g., Stich 1990; Williams 2008). Whilst it goes beyond the scope of this section to examine the various goals that justification might have, I think it is clear that the “interestingness” of the results of a principle of justification affects the plausibility of such a principle: a principle of

justification is not plausible if it cannot deliver the expected degree or form of justification. Hence, the following criterion can be formulated:

Criterion 5: avoiding uninterestingness

A plausible principle of justification produces epistemically interesting results. This means that it produces justification of such nature and degree that it contributes sufficiently to attaining an epistemic goal.

Since the truth goal is clearly an epistemic goal that has support amongst philosophers (Watson n.d., section 9.a), attaining it would already mean that a theory of justification would satisfy this criterion. Attaining other epistemic goals might be valuable as well, although there is less consensus on that in the literature (Watson n.d., section 9.b). In any case, satisfying this criterion will not be uncontroversial because of the disagreement on the epistemic goals. However, if the problem with conservatism is that it only attains a particular epistemic goal one disagrees with, this is still not enough to consider conservatism especially implausible. Hence, for the purposes of this dissertation, such controversies should not prevent a conservative theory from satisfying this criterion.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have evaluated Chisholm's conservatism using the three criteria from the previous chapter as well as a fourth criterion formulated in this chapter. I have also addressed Richard Foley's objections from his often-quoted article on conservatism. In addition, I formulated another criterion: avoiding "uninterestingness". My conclusion is that Foley was right in his conclusion that Chisholm's conservatism is implausible, however, I do not think he was right about the reasons for this implausibility, nor do I think that, on the basis of the implausibility of Chisholm's conservatism, we must conclude that all versions of conservatism are implausible. In the chapters that follow, I will explore and evaluate other versions of conservatism.

Chapter 4

Higher-order Conservatism

Thinking about a subject can bring one closer to its truth, or, at the very least, afford one valuable insight. Hence, one might not consider it a great leap of faith to consider thinking about one's own beliefs epistemically useful. This, roughly speaking, is the nature of higher-order conservatism. This approach to epistemic conservatism claims that thinking about one's beliefs increases the epistemic status of those beliefs. More specifically, having beliefs about one's beliefs determines whether it is justified to maintain a belief or not. To my knowledge, Jonathan Kvanvig (1989) is the only prominent philosopher to formulate and defend this version of epistemic conservatism. In this chapter, I evaluate Kvanvig's approach, whilst also examining and considering the plausibility of further possible variations of higher-order conservatism.

4.1 Kvanvig's Higher-order Conservatism

Although Kvanvig considers epistemic conservatism to be *prima facie* implausible, he also notes that it is presupposed by various epistemological positions, such as Alvin Goldman's maximalism,²⁸ John Rawls's reflective equilibrium, and Roderick Chisholm's particularism, as well as natural responses to sceptical arguments (Kvanvig 1989, 146–148). Kvanvig (1989) goes on to say that “it is also tempting to think that the doctrine of epistemic conservatism is presupposed by any plausible non-sceptical position in epistemology” (149). For Kvanvig, it is clear that conservatism is important, yet he also finds it problematic. Not only does Kvanvig consider Foley's criticism of conservatism to have shown that Chisholm's version of it is implausible; he also has two additional counterexamples against Chisholm's version. The first counterexample is formulated as follows:

*Suppose that Joe believes that God exists while at the same time reasonably believing the truth (let us suppose) that there are overriding epistemic grounds against this belief. In reflecting on this situation, Joe comes to reasonably believe that his belief that God exists is an epistemically irrational belief. Now, [...] if one considers epistemic matters alone, Joe's belief that God exists is not epistemically more reasonable than believing that God does not exist. For [...] Joe would be quite unreasonable in failing to hold that God does not exist.*²⁹ (Kvanvig 1989, 150–151)

28 Goldman (1979a) describes maximalism as follows: “It invites us to use *all* our antecedent beliefs whenever we wish to appraise our cognitive methods. A maximalist argues there is likely to be little or no choice among methods unless we employ a prior corpus of beliefs. And if *some* prior beliefs are allowed, why not allow them all” (29, emphasis in original).

29 Note that Kvanvig uses terms such as “presumptive rationality”, “epistemic rationality”, “justification”, and “a belief having a presumption its favour”. He does not explain how these different terms relate to each other. He does say that a presumptive rational belief can be turned into a fully justified belief (Kvanvig 1989, 145). This might mean that a presumptive rational belief is similar to a *prima facie* justified belief, possibly to a low degree. Moreover, he equates Chisholm's degree of justification “having a presumption in its favour” to “presumptive rationality”, which seems to imply that to a certain extent he uses rationality and justification interchangeably. For present purposes I will assume that this is indeed the case and talk of justification.

According to Kvanvig, this counterexample shows that Chisholm's conservatism is implausible because Joe's belief that God exists is justified according to Chisholm's conservatism (because it is not explicitly contradicted by another belief Joe has), even though Joe himself believes that it is unjustified to believe that God exists.³⁰ For Kvanvig, the contradiction between the justification awarded to Joe's belief by Chisholm's conservatism and Joe's own belief about the epistemic status of his belief shows that Chisholm's conservatism is implausible. Furthermore, Kvanvig does not think that changing the logical connections (explicit contradiction) to probability connections (as Chisholm's second principle seems to do) can help, because "the difficulties with interpretations of probability theory are too well-known to allow any such probabilistic connection to be of such use in defending conservatism" (Kvanvig 1989, 151).

Moreover, Kvanvig (1989) argues Chisholm's conservatism will still be implausible if one only adds a higher-order defeat condition—for example, that a person should not believe that the target belief, P, is unjustified. To illustrate this point, he offers the following counterexample:

Suppose Jack, upon having a near-death experience, finds himself believing that disaster will strike the earth in 1999. He is absolutely convinced that this is so, but grants upon inquiry that he has no reason whatsoever for thinking that it is true. "Call me what you will", he says, "a fideist, irrational, loony, or whatever; but I am as certain that such a disaster will occur as anything, even though I realize I have no reason to think so". (Kvanvig 1989, 152)

The difference with the first counterexample is that Jack does not believe that there is an overriding epistemic ground against his belief that disaster will strike the earth in 1999, whereas Joe does believe there to be such a ground against his belief that God exists. The problem for Chisholm's conservatism is that it allows a belief to be justified even

30 Epistemically reasonable, or rationality, seem to be equivalent to a form of epistemic justification in that they are limited to epistemic considerations.

though the person that holds the belief does not believe that this justification is based on something.

Kvanvig argues that the problems the above poses to Chisholm's conservatism stem from the fact that Chisholm's conservatism is a form of first-order conservatism. This kind of conservatism "claims that the presumptive rationality that accrues in a fashion in accord with conservatism, accrues on the basis of first-order beliefs—beliefs which are not beliefs about beliefs (second-order beliefs), or beliefs about beliefs about beliefs (third-order beliefs), etc." (Kvanvig 1989, 152). Kvanvig's solution is to develop a higher-order version of conservatism. To do this, he argues that epistemic conservatism should be understood as claiming "that the presumptive rationality of a belief can arise from mere doxastic commitment" (Kvanvig 1989, 153). Subsequently, he claims that although the doxastic commitment is usually understood as the target belief itself, it can just as well be another doxastic commitment, such as a belief about the justification of the target belief. In order to avoid the counterexample featuring Jack (above), a plausible version of conservatism needs a higher-order belief that affirms that the target belief, B, is justified. Kvanvig (1989) offers the following version of higher-order conservatism:

K1: *Necessarily, if S believes that P and believes that S's belief that P is shown to be true, then S's belief that P has some presumption in its favour for S. (152)*

Reasoning further, Kvanvig (1989) states that K1 can still run into trouble because it is still possible that "a person believes a proposition, and irrationally believes that there is something that shows his belief to be true" (160).³¹ In other words, the higher-order belief that provides the justification for belief B can itself be defeated. Although Kvanvig does not make this explicit, this also implies that, since a higher-order belief can lose

31 Kvanvig uses the term "irrationally believing", however, he does not expand on the notion and does not seem to contrast this term with justification in his 1989 article. Hence, I will also use it interchangeably with the term "justification".

its positive epistemic status, it requires that a higher-order belief can only give justification to B if the higher-order belief is itself justified. Kvanvig therefore expands K1 with a higher-order defeat condition to prevent epistemic conservatism from allowing “irrationally believing that there is something that shows S’s belief to be true” (160). According to Kvanvig, a person believes irrationally if “there is something of which that person is aware (at least implicitly) which he takes (at least implicitly) to show that this belief is not a good one to have” (160). Since in this case the problem would be to unjustifiably believe that the target belief is justified, the person’s belief is unjustified if he also believes that this higher-order belief is shown to be false. Kvanvig expresses this in the following version of conservatism:

K2: *Necessarily, if S believes that P, S believes that there is something that shows that S’s belief that P is true, and believes nothing else that he takes to show that it is not the case that there is something that shows that S’s belief that P is true, then S’s belief that P has some presumption in its favour for S. (160)*

This version of higher-order conservatism has three levels:

First order: S believes that P (A);

Second order: S believes that A is shown to be true (B);

Third order: S does not believe anything that S takes to show that B is not the case.

Kvanvig notes that the locution “something that shows a belief to be true” is purposely ambiguous so that whatever it is a person considers to be showing that belief is true, is acceptable. This way, according to Kvanvig, various epistemic agents, including children, can gain justification for their beliefs by having a doxastic commitment (160). The general intuition here is that “rationality arises through thinking, or having thoughts, about the epistemic status of one’s beliefs” (Kvanvig 1989, 153).

4.2 Variations of Higher-order Conservatism

To give a more nuanced overview of how higher-order conservatism can be developed, in this section I discuss other possible versions of higher-order conservatism.

The first way in which higher-order conservatism can be developed is by following the idea that reflection on the justificatory status of a belief justifies the maintenance of that belief. This version is similar to Kvanvig's K1, with the difference that believing that a belief is justified does not necessarily mean that a person believes that the target belief is shown to be true. I formulate these as follows:

HOJ: *If S believes that P and believes that "his belief that P is justified", then the maintenance of the belief that P is justified for S.*

The second version mirrors HOJ in that it only requires the absence of a negative epistemic status in the mind of the subject. This can be formulated as follows:

HOU: *If S believes that P and does not believe that "the belief that P is unjustified", then maintenance of the belief that P is justified for S.*

This version resembles a possible version of conservatism that can deal with Kvanvig's first counterexample, albeit one that is dismissed because, according to Kvanvig, his second counterexample (Jack's prediction that disaster will strike the earth) showed it to be counterintuitive. In fact, Kvanvig (1989, 152) argues, it is not even a version of higher-order conservatism. This seems odd because it is the absence or presence of a higher-order belief that determines whether the belief that P acquires a positive or negative epistemic status, which is a doxastic commitment about the target belief and hence a higher-order belief. Understandably, if the aim of higher-order conservatism is to capture the intuition that thinking about the epistemic status of one's beliefs should epistemically count for something, then the mere absence of a higher-order belief is

problematic since the higher-order belief could be absent because one has not thought about the epistemic status of one's belief at all. Notwithstanding that it appears to be a bad version of higher-order conservatism, it is included here for completeness.

Further variations of higher-order conservatism can be made by adding additional levels of higher-order justification or defeat conditions. For example, in HOU one might add a third-order belief about the higher-order defeat conditions, which could be formulated as follows:

HOU+HOJ: *If S believes that P, does not believe that “the belief that P is unjustified”, and believes that “he does not believe that the belief that P is unjustified”, then maintenance of the belief that P is justified for S.*

Yet another variation could be that one adds a third-order defeat condition to HOJ, which could be formulated as follows:

HOJ+HOU: *If S believes that P, believes that “the belief that P is justified”, and does not believe that “his belief that his belief that P is justified” is unjustified, then maintenance of the belief that P is justified for S.*

Note that Kvanvig's K2 is similar to this variation in that there should be a second-order belief and a third-order defeat condition. One could add more levels to higher-order conservatism, for example requiring fourth- and fifth-order beliefs or defeat conditions, but this seems too complex to be realistically entertained. The number of variations I have made here are sufficient for present purposes.

4.3 Evaluating Higher-order Conservatism

In this section I evaluate Kvanvig's higher-order conservatism as expressed in K2 and, where K2 appears implausible, consider whether other versions of higher-order conservatism are plausible. Just as in the previous chapter, I will use the criteria for plausibility of a principle of justification that I have formulated thus far.

Before turning to the criteria themselves, Kvanvig's examples against first-order conservatism need to be discussed. If they are convincing, we either need a plausible higher-order version of conservatism, or reject conservatism altogether. The first example—that Joe believes in God, but also believes it is irrational to do so—is problematic for Chisholm's conservatism because there appears to be a (higher-order) defeater that cannot be accounted for in Chisholm's conservatism. There is no explicit contradiction between having a belief that *P* and the belief that "it is irrational to believe that *P*", so according to Chisholm's conservatism, the belief that *P* would still have a presumption in its favour, despite the presence of a belief that should count as a defeater. One answer might be simply to accept this and say that a belief can have a presumption in its favour and still be considered unjustified by that person, since the justificatory status of a belief is independent of what a person believes about that justificatory status. This seems to be a fair reply, since it challenges Kvanvig's assumption that a justified belief also requires that a subject's beliefs are consistent with that epistemic status—an assumption for which he fails to account. Nonetheless, one might acknowledge the tension Kvanvig is pointing to here, as epistemic conservatism considers the mere fact that a person holds a belief to be relevant for its justification. Hence, the mere fact that a person holds a higher-order belief should, intuitively, be just as relevant. Although Chisholm's conservatism cannot account for this tension, it is not obvious that one cannot have a version of conservatism in which such higher-order defeaters are included amongst the list of defeaters. Even though it does not follow from his examples, Kvanvig's higher-order conservatism seems to claim that one can only have higher-order defeaters.

Kvanvig's second example—that Jack believes that disaster will strike the earth even though he also believes he has no reason for it—is meant to show that mere belief in the absence of defeaters is insufficient for justification, even if there is a higher-order defeat condition (the absence of the belief that the target belief, *P*, is unjustified). However, the example does not make clear why a conservative cannot accept this—after all, the claim that conservatism makes is that one can be justified

in maintaining a belief in the absence of defeaters. So why should the fact that Jack does not have a defeater for his belief make us think that conservatism is implausible? One might say that Jack has an absurd belief that surely should not be justified. However, if this is the argument, it remains unclear how higher-order conservatism might help. After all, one can just as easily construct an example in which Jack believes that disaster will strike the earth, believes that this belief is justified, but also believes he has no reason to think that his belief is unjustified. In this case, higher-order conservatism will justify the same belief as first-order conservatism, so why should the former be preferred? In fact, it seems that the real problem is found in the defeat condition, namely, that it allows absurd beliefs to be justified. Thus, one might expect that any improvement of conservatism should focus on this problem in the defeat condition, rather than adding higher-order beliefs. In other words, Kvanvig's example shows us that whilst Chisholm's conservatism makes a controversial claim, it does not show us why this is the case, whether this is enough to consider conservatism implausible, and, most important of all, why this would motivate higher-order conservatism.

Kvanvig's counterexamples do not show that all versions of conservatism are necessarily implausible. Moreover, they do not give us a motivation for pursuing higher-order conservatism. Nonetheless, trying to find a plausible version of higher-order conservatism can also be motivated by positive reasons, namely the intuition that thinking about the epistemic status of one's beliefs can increase their status. Hence, evaluating higher-order conservatism remains a worthy pursuit.

4.3.1 *Criterion 1: avoiding infinite regression*

A plausible principle of justification does not require a person S to believe an infinite number of propositions in order for a belief that P to be justified for S.

Kvanvig's version of higher-order conservatism can lead to an infinite regress in two ways. First, a person might believe that his belief that P is

shown to be true by an infinite chain of sequential reasons and does not believe anything that will show that this is not the case. Kvanvig's (1989) conservatism allows this because anything can be considered "something that a person takes to show that his belief that P is true" (160). There are no restrictions on this, other than what the person himself believes. The fact that a person has this belief does not in itself entail that he holds an infinite number of beliefs. However, it is obvious that the belief that an infinite number of beliefs shows his belief that P to be true is false, unless it is possible for a person to hold an infinite number of beliefs. This means that Kvanvig's conservatism either allows the justification of a belief on the basis of something that cannot possibly be true, or requires a person to be able to hold an infinite number of beliefs in an inferential sequence. Thus, either it does not satisfy this criterion, or it justifies a belief in a very counterintuitive way. The latter implies that in Kvanvig's conservatism, justification is very uninteresting and would thus fail to satisfy criterion 5.

However, this might not be a fatal objection for higher-order conservatism in general, but only for Kvanvig's specific formulation of it. This is due to the fact that Kvanvig not only requires a person to believe that the belief that P is justified, but also to believe that there is something that shows why the target belief is justified. Since Kvanvig does not want to put any restrictions on higher-order conservatism other than what is believed by the person, any reason is allowed. Note that this objection to Kvanvig's conservatism and the rebuttal can be repeated for criteria 2 and 3. In other words, false or highly implausible reasons will give the same justification as very good reasons, as long as the person believes they do. This seems a peculiar feature of Kvanvig's higher-order conservatism that might be avoided by other versions of higher-order conservatism simply by not requiring a person to believe that there is something that shows his or her belief is justified. In other words, the objection is realised by setting limits to what shows a belief to be justified.

Another way in which higher-order conservatism might lead to an infinite regress is more troubling. An infinite regress can start because the justificatory status of the higher-order belief is relevant. The second-

order belief (the belief that there is something that shows the belief that P to be true) might be defeated by the third-order belief (the belief that a person takes to show that it is not the case that there is something that shows that S's belief that P is shown to be true). This means that the second-order belief can be justified or unjustified. Therefore, the absence of such a third-order belief allows the second-order belief to remain justified. However, in relation to Jack's counterexample, Kvanvig himself argued that the mere absence of a higher-order defeating belief is not enough to allow the target belief to be justified. The mere absence of a third-order defeating belief could also be due to the fact that one has not reflected on the justificatory status of the second-order belief. So why would the mere absence of a second-order defeating belief in Jack's counterexample be problematic, whereas the mere absence of a third-order defeating belief is not? There does not seem to be a non-arbitrary way of answering this question. Hence, if we follow Kvanvig's logic, we should add a (rather complicated) fourth-order belief that S takes to show that S does not believe something that he takes to show that it is not the case that there is something that shows that S's belief that P is true. However, here again we could ask if the mere absence of a fifth-order defeating belief is enough to allow the fourth-order belief to be justified and, according to Kvanvig's logic, S has to continue stacking higher-order beliefs that show that S does not have a higher-order defeating belief and these higher-order beliefs can only be allowed to be justified if higher-order defeating beliefs are absent. This then goes on ad infin-

itum, which would require a person to hold an infinite number of beliefs.³² Therefore, Kvanvig's conservatism does not satisfy this criterion.

The HOU version of higher-order conservatism will not lead to such an infinite regress because the mere absence of a higher-order defeater does not require a belief about that absence—it simply needs to be absent. Other versions of higher-order conservatism share the same problem as Kvanvig's conservatism: if a belief is justified by thinking about its epistemic status, the higher-order belief also needs to be thought about in order to be justified. There are three ways in which an infinite regress of increasingly higher-order beliefs can be avoided. First, if thinking about the justificatory status of the target belief does not mean that a new higher-order belief needs to be formed. In this case, the product of thought might be something else that does not require justification itself—the experience of thinking, for example. The second way is by deviating from Kvanvig's intuition that it is thinking about the justificatory status of a target belief that generates the justificatory status of the target belief. Instead, justification of the target belief may stem in another way from the higher-order belief such that the higher-order belief does not itself stem from another higher-order belief. Finally, one might argue that higher-order beliefs do not require justification from something else because they are part of a special class of beliefs. In any case, one might argue that there are versions of higher-order conservatism that do not lead to infinite regressions.

32 Note that epistemic infinitists such as Klein and Turri (n.d.) argue that an infinite regress of reasons might not be problematic if one does not assume that these reasons need to be beliefs themselves. However, even if one were to accept infinitism, Kvanvig's higher-order conservatism cannot be saved from the described infinite regress problem because he clearly says that his version of conservatism can rightly be considered conservatism because justification comes from the 'doxastic commitment' a person has, i.e., the fact that a person has a higher-order belief (1989, 153). Hence, for Kvanvig's conservatism to work it is not enough to have an infinite chain of higher-order propositions available for S but S in fact needs to believe all those propositions, which seems impossible (as I discuss in section 2.2). Atkinson and Peijnenburg (2017; 2019) argue that infinitism is compatible with committing oneself to just a few beliefs, but since their approach relies on pragmatic considerations it is in my view not free from epistemic arbitrariness.

The issue of infinite regress cannot be avoided by Kvanvig's conservatism because here justification comes from thinking about the justification of a target belief and successfully doing so itself leads to a higher-order belief. This means that at every level of higher-order belief, a belief at an even higher level is required. However, for other versions of higher-order conservatism there might be a solution—the plausibility of which is addressed in the section “avoiding arbitrariness” (4.3.3).

4.3.2 Criterion 2: avoiding circularity

A plausible principle of justification avoids circularity such that the belief that P is not justified by a chain of reasons that is grounded in the belief that P itself.

Kvanvig's conservatism does not seem to be circular. This can best be shown if we present justification as follows:

1. S holds the belief that P;
2. If (i) S believes that P, (II) believes that “there is something that shows that S's belief that P is true”, and (III) believes nothing else that he takes to show that it is not the case that there is something that shows that S's belief that P is shown to be true, then S's belief that P has some presumption in its favour for S;
3. S holds the belief that there is something that shows S's belief that P is true;
4. S does not hold the belief that there something else that he takes to show that it is not the case that there is something that shows S's belief that P is shown to be true;
5. Therefore, the belief that P has some presumption in its favour for S.

The other versions of higher-order conservatism appear similar to Kvanvig's conservatism in their basic structure and equally avoid circularity of this kind. Hence, this criterion is satisfied.

4.3.3 Criterion 3: avoiding arbitrariness

A plausible principle of justification is able to explain the difference between a justified and an unjustified belief.

In all versions of higher-order conservatism the difference between being justified and unjustified is explained by the presence or absence of a higher-order belief. Kvanvig (1989) adds to this that justification “arises through thinking, or having thoughts about, the epistemic status of one’s beliefs” (153). This “thinking about” is then itself expressed by a belief about the justificatory status of the target belief. Yet how robust is this explanation?

Kvanvig is unable to prevent an infinite regress. Since it is not possible for a person to hold an infinite number of beliefs, at some point a person will not be able to give an additional higher-order belief (and before that point it would probably seem pointless to advance so many levels of higher-order beliefs). However, there is no explanation, other than that it is not possible to go on, why one stops at one point as opposed to some other. Hence, without further explanation, this decision seems arbitrary. Thus, Kvanvig’s understanding of higher-order conservatism cannot avoid an infinite regress without being arbitrary. This means that it either does not satisfy criterion 1 or criterion 3, and hence is implausible.

However, is there a way out for Kvanvig? Perhaps thinking about the epistemic status of a belief can also be understood in a way other than forming or having a higher-order belief about the justificatory status of a target belief. I mentioned that thinking about the status of a belief might also be understood as experiencing it. One might call it the “experience of epistemic reflection”. This would not be too far-fetched as people—philosophers included—often speak of certain reasoning or arguments as “seeming unlikely to be true upon reflection” or as “counterintuitive if we think about it”. If we assume this, we might argue that such an experience can give a justificatory status to a higher-order belief. Clearly, it would be an experience of epistemic reflection on the “belief that there is

something that shows *S*'s belief that *P* is true", which would then justify the higher-order belief, which in turn justifies the target belief. Hence, the reflective experience ultimately explains the difference between justified and unjustified beliefs.

However, acceptance of this reasoning forces one to ask why higher-order beliefs exist in the first place. Instead of having a higher-order belief about the justificatory status of the target belief that is then itself justified because of an experience of epistemic reflection, the experience of epistemic reflection about the target belief can itself justify the target belief. In other words, higher-order beliefs have become useless. Moreover, it seems that this is not actually epistemic conservatism, but a different, albeit related view, namely a version of phenomenal conservatism. This view, primarily defended by Michael Huemer (2001, 99; 2007, 30), states that, if a proposition appears to be true, then given the absence of defeaters, this appearance gives some justification for believing that proposition. Thus, if ultimately it is the experience of "seeming to be true" or "seeming to be justified" that is the explanation for the difference between a justified and an unjustified belief, then there is no comparative advantage for higher-order conservatism over first-order conservatism, and it is no longer the mere doxastic commitment in the absence of defeaters from which justification originates. In effect, it is no longer epistemic conservatism.

Another way in which "thinking about the justificatory status of a belief" might be understood, is that thinking is a reliable process. In other words, the higher-order belief is itself justified because it is the product of a reliable belief-forming process. Just as with experience, there does not seem to be any comparative advantage for higher-order beliefs, so a reliable belief-forming process can make first-order beliefs equally as justified as higher-order beliefs. Once more, the higher-order belief seems useless. This appears to be a version of another theory: reliabilism. This theory was first proposed by Alvin Goldman (1975), who states that a belief is justified if it is the product of a reliable belief-forming process. Since I do not see another plausible understanding

of “thinking about the justificatory status of a belief” that can justify higher-order beliefs, I see no way out for Kvanvig.

The second way to avoid the dilemma between arbitrariness and infinite regression is to say that higher-order beliefs evidence the target belief directly or provide evidence for the absence of a defeater. The latter might work as follows: If S has a belief that P and has evidence for the absence of defeaters for the belief that P, then the belief that P has some presumption in its favour. In this case one might argue that believing that the belief that “P is shown to be true” counts as evidence for the absence of defeaters because the likelihood of having a defeater for the belief that P decreases when one also believes that the belief that P is shown to be true. The target belief would be justified because the evidence decreases the likelihood that there is a defeater.

However, if higher-order beliefs are treated as evidence, the result might be an infinite regress. The evidence itself, therefore, also needs to be justified—something that either comes from another belief that serves as evidence, or from something else. This means that either the chain of evidence continues or, as I discussed above, it is based on something that could have justified the target belief directly. In other words, it is unclear what the added value of the higher-order beliefs would be. Once again, therefore, this does not provide a viable solution.

The third way in which arbitrariness might be avoided is simply denying that higher-order beliefs are justified on the basis of something else. There is a special class of beliefs that are justified by themselves, namely self-evident beliefs. As soon as one holds them, one knows that they are true and that it is impossible for them to be false.³³ For example, the belief that “I have a belief” is self-evident: as soon as we have this belief, we also see that it is true and that it is impossible for it to be false. Could it be that higher-order beliefs about the epistemic status of the target belief are also of this nature? Although these higher-order beliefs

33 Note that this is slightly different from self-evident propositions. With self-evident propositions it is understanding the meaning of a proposition that gives an immediate and infallible justification that that proposition is true.

are different from first-order beliefs, it is not clear why this difference should imply a difference in justificatory status. There is nothing in their content that makes higher-order beliefs more likely to be true, or indeed epistemically valuable. This line of reasoning, therefore, is insufficient.

The above discussion shows something fundamental about higher-order conservatism: There is no epistemically relevant difference between higher-order beliefs and first-order beliefs, and therefore a higher-order belief cannot provide more justification than a first-order belief. Whatever the exact content of the higher-order belief, it still needs to be justified and since there is no relevant difference with first-order beliefs, everything that might justify a higher-order belief could also justify the target belief, rendering the higher-order belief nothing more than a useless detour.

There might, however, be an exception. HOU does not depend on a person *S* having a higher-order belief in order for the target belief *P* to gain a positive epistemic status. Hence, it avoids arbitrariness in the sense that the justificatory status of the higher-order belief remains unexplained. Moreover, there is an explanation for the difference between justified and unjustified beliefs: the absence of the belief that “the target belief is unjustified”. However, is this explanation sufficient? Not really, because, as mentioned above, the mere absence of a higher-order belief about the justificatory status of a belief might very well be due to the fact that a person simply does not reflect on the justificatory status of that belief. Without further qualification this seems rather arbitrary, since one might be justified because, after thorough reflection, one did not find any defeating higher-order beliefs or because one simply did not think about it.

A natural reaction would be to require that it is a necessary condition for justification that one has reflected upon the justificatory status of one’s target belief. This would mean that “thinking about the justificatory status of a belief” means that one starts a belief-forming process about the justificatory status of the target belief. If the process does not result in a higher-order belief that the target belief is not justified, then the target belief is justified. However, this takes us right back to

the discussion above. In this case, the belief-forming process needs to be reliable in order to not produce a higher-order belief about the epistemic status of the target belief. Again, this would beg the question of why a reliable belief-forming process could not immediately produce justified beliefs. HOU does not constitute an exception after all. Thus, higher-order conservatism does not avoid arbitrariness in the sense that it can explain the difference between justified and unjustified beliefs without failing to be epistemic conservatism.

4.3.4 Criterion 4: avoiding the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*

*A plausible principle of justification avoids arbitrariness as a consequence of the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*. This means that the formulation explains the difference between passing judgment and suspending judgment.*

Can higher-order conservatism adequately deal with cases in which judgment should be suspended—for example, in beliefs such as whether there are an odd or an even number of stars? Let me start with Kvanvig’s conservatism, K2. Is it possible in K2 to neither believe P nor \neg P? According to K2, if a person believes that “there are an odd number of stars in the universe”, believes that there is something that shows that this belief is true (a second-order belief), and that he has no other beliefs that show the second-order belief to be false, then the first-order belief has a presumption in its favour for him. However, if this person also believes that “the number of stars could just as well be even” and takes this belief to show that his belief that “the number of stars is odd is not shown to be true”, then the belief that “there is an odd number of stars” does not have a presumption in its favour for that person. It is likely that the latter is the case. Then, for K2, such a belief is not justified. In other words, Foley’s (1982) concern that conservatism justifies belief in propositions the opposites of which could just as easily be true does not affect Kvanvig’s K2.

However, as I have argued, the underlying problem is whether conservatism can explain the difference between passing and suspending

judgment. If the first-order belief is defeated by the higher-order belief that there is a proposition that shows the first-order belief is not shown to be true, does this mean that this proposition is equally unjustified? In other words, if S takes the proposition that 'there are an even number of stars' to show that the belief that 'there are an odd number of stars' to not be shown to be true, should S also think the reverse is true on K2? It seems there is no conclusive answer because it depends on whether S takes such a belief to show that neither P nor \neg P should be believed. Hence, on K2 it is possible that S should not suspend judgment in cases like the coin toss and hence cannot avoid this kind of arbitrariness.

Yet, this might be remedied by adding another condition as follows: If S believes that he cannot judge whether P or \neg P then S should suspend judgment on P and \neg P. Moreover, this also means that a target belief can only be justified if a person believes that he can judge whether P or \neg P. otherwise he should suspend judgment. Such a condition could also be added to Kvanvig's conservatism and hence his version could also be adapted to satisfy this criterion. Therefore, in the context of this criterion, higher-order conservatism is not implausible.

4.3.5 Criterion 5: avoiding uninterestingness

A plausible principle of justification produces epistemically interesting results. This means that it produces justification of such nature and degree that it contributes sufficiently to attaining an epistemic goal.

Although I have formulated this criterion in such a way that it allows for various epistemic goals, I will dedicate most of my attention to the truth goal. Does higher-order conservatism get us closer to the truth? In other words, are the results of higher-order conservatism interesting because they help us reach the truth goal?

Let me start with Kvanvig's conservatism again. How will Kvanvig's conservatism help us attain the truth goal—i.e., how might it help us have more true beliefs and avoid false beliefs? This will be achieved if thinking about the justificatory status of one's beliefs shares a correla-

tion with those beliefs being true or false—i.e., having the higher-order beliefs without the higher-order defeaters increases the likelihood that the belief that P is true. The likelihood of the belief that P being true will only increase if the likelihood of the second-order belief—that there is something that shows the belief that P to be true—is higher than the likelihood of the belief that P is true, since, if it is the same or lower, it will not do anything to increase the likelihood of P being true. However, this necessarily raises the question why the second-order belief *prima facie* is more likely to be true than the first-order belief. This is the same question I posed in the section on avoiding arbitrariness (above). An answer would need to show that in some way the higher-order belief-forming process is more trustworthy than the first-order belief-forming process. In K2, the trustworthiness of the second-order belief seems to come from the absence of a third-order defeater. This means that false second-order beliefs will be filtered out sufficiently to increase the likelihood of a second-order belief being true. Yet, why would these third-order defeaters make it likely that the second-order beliefs are true? It is not obvious that there is a belief-forming process such that the third-order beliefs in K2 will likely be formed when there is second-order false belief and, hence, if there is false second-order belief it will not be filtered out by the third-order defeat condition. Therefore, in terms of the truth goal, Kvanvig’s conservatism does not provide interesting results.

Do other versions of higher-order conservatism fare any better in getting us closer to the truth? It would appear not, since all versions depend on justification that stems from a higher-order belief about the justificatory status of the belief and there does not seem to be anything about those beliefs that make them more likely to be true than first-order beliefs. Perhaps one could challenge this by claiming that the process of thinking leads to a higher likelihood of a belief being true—after all, that is what philosophy and science aim towards. As we have seen above, in higher-order conservatism the “process of thinking” refers to thinking about the justificatory status of one’s belief. Yet one can easily imagine that the process of thinking can also be focused on a proposition itself. If that process of thinking leads to a belief, it is not clear why that belief

is not equally likely to be true as the higher-order belief that is also the result from the process of thinking. In other words, if the process of thinking about a belief or proposition increases the likelihood of that belief being true, then there does not seem to be a reason why higher-order beliefs are more likely to be true than other beliefs that are the result of thinking about a belief or proposition. Therefore, it seems that other versions of higher-order conservatism will not help us achieve the truth goal either.

Epistemologists disagree about whether (or not) the truth goal should even be the primary epistemic goal in the first place. Kvanvig (2005) himself argues that truth is not the primary epistemic goal. An alternative goal could be understanding—for example, understanding the proposition that *P*. Whilst there is disagreement regarding how “understanding” should be defined, people can usually arrive at an intuitive sense of the term. For example, a mechanic understands how an engine works, or a mathematics teacher understands calculus. If justification helps us to attain this epistemic goal, then justification increases one’s understanding of a proposition, and so if a belief is justified, it is more likely to be understood than to be misunderstood. The question now becomes: Does higher-order conservatism help us gain greater understanding?

Take the engine example. If a person believes that an engine works by igniting a flammable substance (in this case petrol), which then sets in motion a piston, which in turn moves a crankshaft, is such an understanding increased by having a higher-order belief about the justificatory status of this belief on how an engine works? It is hard to see that it would. If someone believes that an engine works by putting fuel in it and pushing the throttle, does that understanding increase if that person also believes that this belief is shown to be true? This is not how understanding seems to work. Perhaps this becomes more plausible when one does not talk about the justificatory status of a belief, but rather understanding. A higher-order belief would then look something like this: *S* believes that she understands the contents of her belief that *P*. So, if someone believes that an engine works by putting some fuel in it and

putting one's foot on the throttle, does she understand how an engine works more if she also believes that she understands that an engine works by putting some fuel in it and putting one's foot on the throttle? Again, intuitively, the answer is no, since having more understanding of how an engine works would seem to mean that at least there is more information or detail added—something that a higher-order belief about the epistemic status simply does not give. Hence, higher-order conservatism does not seem to produce interesting results when we change the epistemic goal to “increasing understanding”.

Another epistemic goal might be consistency. In other words, if a belief is justified for a given individual, it means that the goal of consistency is reached. Higher-order conservatism does seem to add to the consistency amongst the beliefs a person holds, since it excludes certain inconsistent relations between beliefs. For example, when someone holds a belief that *P*, but also holds the higher-order belief that the belief that *P* is not justified, higher-order conservatism excludes this belief from the set of justified beliefs and this increases consistency. Moreover, Kvanvig's conservatism would also increase the consistency of higher-order beliefs because of its higher-order defeat condition. Whilst Kvanvig's conservatism is partially successful in this endeavour, the results are less interesting than that of first-order conservatism such as that espoused by Chisholm, in which a belief is unjustified if it is not consistent with the set of other beliefs a person has, which includes higher-order beliefs about the epistemic status of the target belief. Yet in higher-order conservatism, only beliefs that are inconsistent with higher-order beliefs about the justificatory status of the target belief will be used to exclude beliefs that are inconsistent with this set of higher-order beliefs. Unless all beliefs that are inconsistent with all other beliefs a person has also lead to a higher-order belief about the justificatory status of the target belief, the achieved consistency will always be lower than in first-order conservatism. Thus, it would seem that the result, at least in the context of consistency, is too small compared to the alternative to be really considered interesting. On account of these epistemic goals,

it seems that higher-order conservatism is uninteresting and therefore I conclude that it does not satisfy this criterion either.

4.4 Conclusion

Higher-order conservatism might have an initial intuitive appeal when understood as “thinking about the epistemic status of our beliefs”. However, it quickly encounters numerous problems. Due to its language and use of first-, second-, and third-order beliefs and defeat conditions, Kvanvig’s conservatism is not easy to grasp. Furthermore, simpler versions of higher-order conservatism, on closer examination, fail to be plausible. Although higher-order conservatism can avoid circularity and the *ad ignorantiam* fallacy, it cannot avoid arbitrariness. The arbitrariness in higher-order conservatism comes from the fact that it gives higher-order beliefs a higher *prima facie* epistemic status than first-order beliefs, yet there is no plausible explanation why this should be the case. Since all versions of higher-order conservatism by definition share this feature, it does not matter which variation of higher-order conservatism one adopts. Moreover, Kvanvig’s conservatism has the potential of infinite regress because the positive epistemic status of a higher-order belief comes from thinking about it, which means a higher-order belief about a higher-order belief. Furthermore, it seems that higher-order conservatism does not produce very interesting results. In sum, higher-order conservatism does not work and, even if it would work, it would be useless. Since higher-order conservatism fails to satisfy criteria 3 and 5 (and, in the case of some versions, criterion 1), I do not consider them to be plausible.

Chapter 5

Further Objections to Epistemic Conservatism

In this chapter, I address a number of objections that have been raised against epistemic conservatism since the publication of Kvanvig's article (1989) on higher-order conservatism. Together with those addressed in previous chapters, these constitute the main objections to epistemic conservatism. Of course, any plausible formulation of conservatism needs to engage with these objections. Therefore, in this chapter, I evaluate each objection in turn and formulate a criterion for the plausibility of epistemic conservatism when the objection holds.

5.1 Coin-toss Objection

David Christensen (1994) is one of the philosophers who considers epistemic conservatism to be highly implausible. He even calls it “the ultimate expression of the dogmatic attitude” and finds it “curious” that various philosophers have defended the idea at all (69). Christensen sets himself the task of critically examining epistemic conservatism in order that we might “resist the temptation to sanction even an attenuated form of dogmatic thinking in our epistemology” (70). He does this by way of the following counterexample:

Suppose you flip a coin, and it lands out of my sight. Without going over to look, I decide that it has landed “tails” up. I do not believe the coin to be biased, nor do I believe myself telepathic, nor am I a victim of the gambler’s fallacy who has just seen several “heads” in a row. I simply believe that the coin has landed “tails” up. Now, it seems to me that the fact that I now believe that it landed “tails” up does not justify me—in any measure at all—in maintaining my belief that it landed “tails” up. No belief about the orientation of the coin is justified in my present evidential situation, and no less evidence would be required to justify me in believing that it landed “heads” up than would be required to justify me in believing that it landed tails up. To the degree that I favour “tails” over “heads” in revising my beliefs, merely on the basis of the fact that I currently believe it landed “tails” up, I am being dogmatic. (Christensen 1994, 74)

The concern here is that in the case of conservatism, the fact that one has the belief that the coin has landed “tails” up makes the belief justified, even though there is nothing that favours that belief over its negation. Note that Christensen says that the person decides to believe that the coin landed “tails” up. This is, at best, a questionable way to describe the process of belief formation, since people do not seem to be capable

to believe at will—at least not as is described in this case.³⁴ Hence, I will ignore that part of the example and simply start with the fact that a person believes that the coin landed “tails” up.

This example is similar to Foley’s (1983, 174–175) “whispering sands” that I discussed in Chapter 3, in which the question was whether a person is justified in believing that there is an even number of grains of sand on the beach. According to Foley, this showed that conservatism leads to the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*. This explains my formulation of criterion 4: a plausible theory of justification should be able to explain the difference between passing and suspending judgment. For such cases, in a plausible version of epistemic conservatism, judgment should be suspended.

In his defence of his version of epistemic conservatism, Kevin McCain (2008) suggests that “[Christensen’s] example of the coin toss is an instance of belief formation” (198). Yet McCain’s own version of conservatism is not committed to saying that forming the belief that a coin landed “tails up” is justified because conservatism is about belief maintenance. However, the example can be modified in order that it might deal with such belief maintenance. If someone were to believe that the coin landed “tails up”, but has forgotten why he formed that belief, he would be justified to retain his belief. McCain (2008) argues that, even then, this is not necessarily problematic, because in the defeat condition of his version of conservatism the coherence between the belief and a person’s background knowledge plays a role. Since it is very unlikely that someone does not have background knowledge on the probabilities of coin tosses, the justification for its belief would be defeated. Furthermore, in the rare cases that such background knowledge does not exist, the resulting (apparent) counterintuitiveness only comes from the background knowledge possessed by a neutral observer (McCain 2008, 198–199).

The crucial point here is that the distinction between belief formation and belief maintenance is relevant in addressing counterexamples

34 For example, Bernard Williams (1970) has argued that direct doxastic voluntarism is false. Recently Rik Peels (2017) has argued that direct doxastic voluntarism is false, but that one can have responsible belief, nonetheless.

to conservatism. The coin toss example aims to show that the mere fact that a person holds a belief cannot be its justification. This objection is successful if conservatism is understood as claiming that the fact that “S believes that P” is the reason for S to form the belief that P. Such reasoning would tend towards backward causality, or rather backward reasoning, and as such would be very implausible, if not incoherent. However, as McCain rightly points out, if we understand conservatism to claim that the fact that “S believes that P” is the reason for S to retain the belief that P, then there is no problem of backward reasoning. To address the concern of backward reasoning, the following criterion can be formulated:

Criterion 6: avoiding backward reasoning

A plausible principle of justification does not use the fact that a person already holds a belief as a reason to form that belief.

5.2 The Basing Relationship Objection

Another objection is raised by Matthew Frise (2017), who suggests that epistemic conservatism cannot be reconciled with causal accounts of the so-called “basing relationship” (289–290): the idea that in order for a belief to be justified by a reason, the belief should in fact be based on that reason. Frise assumes a causal account of the basing relationship (289). In such an account, the reason for a belief is understood as a mental state that is a sufficient or contributing cause of the justified belief.³⁵ The problem for conservatism, however, is that the belief itself now becomes the justifier, meaning that the belief needs to be caused by itself, which seems impossible (Frise 2017). In the following, I consider various responses to this objection.

Kevin McCain (2020, 207) argues that this is not problematic for conservatism if one takes conservatism to provide only minimal positive

35 An example of such a theory is posited by Paul Moser (1989), who offers the following account: “S’s believing or assenting to P is based on his justifying propositional reason Q =_{cf} S’s believing or assenting to P is causally sustained in a nondeviant manner by his believing or assenting to Q, and by his associating P and Q” (157).

evidence for P that is insufficient to justify the belief that P. Because the belief that P is not the justifier, no causal basing relationship is required. Moreover, McCain argues that such minimal positive evidence does not add up to other evidence such that an extra boost objection would occur. Thus, P would not be part of the justification of P, and hence no basing relationship is required (208). He also argues that P at T1 being the cause of P at T2 is not problematic because if P at T2 is justified on the basis of something else, the fact that there are other causal factors is irrelevant (McCain 2020, 209).³⁶

It seems that McCain's strategy is to sever any association between the minimal positive evidence gained through conservatism and justification. However, this brings into question the status of this minimal positive epistemic evidence. If it has nothing to do with justification, what, then, might its purpose be? If some other epistemic status is achieved, would the causal account of the basing relationship not still apply—and if not, why not? Furthermore, it is not so much a defence of conservatism (as it is often understood), but more a withdrawal and surrender of conservative claims. Hence, from McCain's perspective, the objection would be somewhat successful.

Note that McCain distinguishes between dynamic and static versions of conservatism, and it appears that the line of reasoning shown above is only applicable to the static version. In a dynamic version, a belief can justifiably be retained, whereas in a static version, such a belief is only justified at a particular time.³⁷ According to McCain (2020, 211, endnote 16), a dynamic version of conservatism is intuitively more reconcilable with a causal account of the basing relationship. Presumably this is because a belief that P at T1 can be a cause for the belief that P at T2. Moreover, Frise (2017) suggests, "it might be plausible that we should trust our past selves, other things being equal" (289). Frise (2017, 289)

36 T1 and T2 indicate successive times.

37 Frise, whom McCain echoes here, describes the difference as follows: "if S believes that P at T1 then S's belief that P at T2 is *prima facie* justified" (where T1 and T2 indicate successive times), with a synchronic version such as this: "if S believes that P at T1 then S's belief that P at T1 is *prima facie* justified" (Frise 2017, 289).

has argued that only a diachronic version of conservatism might be plausible, because a synchronic version implies that a belief must cause itself given the causal account of the basing relationship.

The distinction between diachronic and synchronic justification does not align exactly with the distinction between justification of belief formation and belief maintenance. However, as I have argued, the latter distinction is crucial for conservatism. The cause of a belief is intuitively linked to its origins. In other words, the causal understanding of the basing relationship is intuitively linked to belief formation—i.e., the justifier to form the belief that P should also be its cause. However, it is not immediately clear whether such a causal understanding is the most intuitive understanding of the basing relationship for belief maintenance. Hence, it is not clear why the conservative could not simply deny that this account is relevant for principles of belief maintenance.

An even more crucial question is whether it even makes sense to speak of a basing relationship in the context of epistemic conservatism. The basing relationship speaks of the relation between a reason to believe that P and the belief that P (Korcz 2021). However, the point of conservatism was to show that in the absence of defeaters one is justified to maintain the belief that P and not that the belief that P is a reason for believing that P. The objection would make sense if one were to understand conservatism as an inferential principle—i.e., if it is a principle that says that the fact that S believes that P is a reason for believing that P. However, a proponent of epistemic conservatism is not committed to such a view. In fact, one might say that epistemic conservatism presents a principle that competes with such a view. It seems that this objection is based on an assumption about justification that is not shared by epistemic conservatism. Hence, this objection does not pose a problem for conservatism.

5.3 “Lefty-Righty” Objection

Richard Feldman (2003) uses the following example to demonstrate the counterintuitive nature of epistemic conservatism:

Detective Jones has definitively narrowed down the suspects in a crime to two individuals, Lefty and Righty. There are good reasons to think Lefty did it, but there are equally good reasons to think that Righty did it. There is conclusive evidence to think that no one other than Lefty or Righty did it. [...] Suppose Jones came upon the evidence about Lefty first and so reasonably came to believe that Lefty did it. Once he learns that there is equally good evidence for the proposition that Righty did it, he should stop believing that Lefty did it. (144)

According to Feldman, epistemic conservatism would commit one to continue to believe that Lefty did it by virtue of the fact that Jones already believes that Lefty did it (144). Such a commitment is counter-intuitive and hence makes conservatism implausible (Feldman 2003).

Although it is slightly different from the grains of sand on the beach and coin toss examples because the initial belief is justifiably formed, in essence, the problem is the same: there are cases in which the mere fact that a person believes a proposition obviously does not make it more likely that the proposition is true. The fourth criterion already encompasses such counterexamples. The fact that the belief was initially justified does not change this. Moreover, in this specific example, one might imagine that the initial belief that "Lefty did it" was defeated by the evidence that "Righty did it", meaning that according to conservatism, detective Jones' belief was not justified in the first place. In any case, the intuition in the example is that, in case of equally good reasons for two mutually exclusive beliefs, neither belief should be justified. If a version of conservatism satisfies the fourth criterion, this objection will not pose a problem for that version.

5.4 Two Scientists' Objection

Another counterexample is offered by Hamid Vahid (2004):

Suppose two scientists S_1 and S_2 who, faced with the task of explaining the same data, come up with incompatible but evidentially equivalent hypotheses H_1 and H_2 respectively. Suppose further that the hypotheses in

question become known to both sometime later during a meeting where S_2 , for some reason of his own, gives up H_2 and follows S_1 in believing H_1 . Now, according to [epistemic conservatism], S_2 should have stuck with H_2 . His belief that H_1 is, thus, unjustified while S_1 is justified in believing H_1 and rejecting H_2 . So, assuming [epistemic conservatism] is normatively correct, we are faced with a situation in which while believing H_1 is rational (justified) for S_1 , another token of the same belief fails to be rational (justified) for S_2 despite the two tokens sharing the same subvening justification-conferring property, and this contravenes the thesis of epistemic supervenience. (105)³⁸

The objection is that conservatism is committed to giving different levels of justification to apparently similar beliefs (S_1 's belief that H_1 and S_2 's belief that H_1), even though, according to the concept of supervenience, H_1 should confer the same justification to both S_1 's and S_2 's beliefs. Supervenience can be understood as saying that when a property "A" supervenes on another property "B", there cannot be an A-difference without a B-difference. So, in Vahid's example, being rational or justified is the property that supervenes on the justification-conferring property. Vahid does not mention it, but it seems that the data upon which the hypotheses are based are the subvening property. Moreover, the most charitable interpretation of Vahid's example is that the two scientists are operating in the same context such that the differences cannot be explained by the context either. We must therefore ask ourselves: is conservatism committed to claiming that the same hypotheses—based on the same data and in the same context—can still have a different epistemic appraisal?

38 Vahid (2004) uses this example to challenge a form of conservatism that he terms "Differential Conservatism", which is defined as follows: "one is justified in holding to a hypothesis (belief) despite coming to know of evidentially equivalent alternatives" (102). Vahid (2004, 102) further cites Lawrence Sklar's defence of this form of conservatism. However, this form of conservatism is narrower than that which I have in mind, since it only describes one situation in which a belief can be maintained without losing its justification. I will not discuss this view of conservatism at this moment and will take Vahid's example as potentially an objection to all formulations of conservatism—a route also taken by McCain (2008, 196).

In epistemic conservatism, justification for retaining S's belief that P crucially depends on the fact that "S believes that P". In other words, if S stops believing that P then S no longer has justification for continuing to believe that P, which is not surprising because continuing to hold on to a belief one no longer has is conceptually impossible. In Vahid's example, however, it is assumed that since S2 believed H2 at moment T, S2 can only be justified in believing H2 at time T+1. However, if S2 in fact stops believing H2 at T+1, the necessary condition for justification in epistemic conservatism is no longer satisfied. Hence, if at time T+1 S2 has in fact started believing H1, then S2 is justified in believing H1 at T+1, even if S2 was also justified in believing H2 at T. Vahid's example did not accurately portray the necessary conditions for justification on conservatism and hence in a more accurate portrayal, conservatism is not committed to denying the epistemic supervenience thesis in this example.

However, the intuition that Vahid was probably pointing to was that if epistemic conservatism claims that S is justified in believing that P, then S should continue to believe that P and not stop believing that P. This in turn seems to suggest that if S does stop believing that P, then in epistemic conservatism, he cannot be justified in believing that $\neg P$ because he should have stuck to his belief that P. The conservative seems committed to saying that S should continue believing that P until he no longer believes that P. In other words, it seems as if epistemic conservatism cannot give epistemic guidance beyond what is in fact the case, whereas one expects guidance to be about what one can or should believe irrespective of what one at that moment in fact believes. Does the epistemic guidance of conservatism then amount to a "normative tautology"? Should one believe what one in fact believes?

Not quite. First, in conservatism the defeat condition plays an important role and there are likely to be many cases in which one ought not to believe what one in fact believes because of a defeater. For example, someone who now believes the earth is flat clearly should not continue to hold on to that belief because there is ample evidence—photographs of the earth, historical circumnavigations, the trajectories of shipping lanes and air routes, to name but a few—that the earth is, in fact, spher-

ical. One can imagine that epistemic guidance about putting effort into holding on to beliefs can also be applicable given the fact that “S believes that P”. For example, the norm that S should hold on to S’s believe that P might also mean that one should not pay attention to psychological doubts one has about the belief if there are no further reasons for that doubt. This would still amount to guidance about S’s belief that P, even if the guidance would no longer be relevant as soon as S no longer in fact believes that P. Finally, one might also understand epistemic guidance as dealing with epistemic permissibility. In such instances, epistemic guidance might suggest that S is allowed to continue to hold on to his belief that P if in fact S believes that P and there are no defeaters for this belief.

Of course, this does show the limits of epistemic conservatism: it cannot give guidance on what beliefs to form, but only on what beliefs to maintain. This limit is already implied by the notion of avoiding backward reasoning in the sixth criterion. Hence, if a version of conservatism satisfies this criterion, it will respect this limit. Vahid’s counterexample does not make epistemic conservatism implausible, instead highlighting an important limitation.

5.5 Conversion Objection

Ted Poston (2012) suggests that lying at the core of many counterexamples to conservatism is the conversion objection: the idea that “conservatism may improperly change the epistemic situation of a subject” (536). The idea is that, in cases where two propositions are mutually exclusive and counterbalanced by evidence, any conversion of attitude towards one of the propositions means that the proposition in question has become rational. The problem, Poston continues, is that “it implies that belief can change the epistemic situation so that the believed content is now rational to believe whereas formerly it was not” (536). According to Poston, such an observation was also made by Foley when he stated that “all conservative positions will imply that simply by being believed a proposition acquires some kind of favourable epistemic status which in some way alters what is required to make that proposition [rational]” (Foley 1983, 179, cited in Poston 2012, 536–537, emphasis in original).

Imagine, then, a case in which neither P nor $\neg P$ are justified beliefs for S given his epistemic situation. He has evidence for both P and $\neg P$. Then, for some (unknown) reason, S starts believing that P . According to epistemic conservatism, S 's belief that P now is justified. Nothing but the fact that " S (now) believes that P " has changed and this, it appears, is enough to convert the epistemic situation such that S 's belief that P is now justified. This is counterintuitive and hence, by this metric, conservatism would be implausible.

Matthew McGrath's (2007, 18) solution is to broaden the range of defeating conditions. For McGrath, a defeater is not something that needs to be possessed, but rather needs to be "constructible from materials in one's current perspective" (18). A defeater is constructible if "the simple exercise of properly functioning human cognitive capacities" (18) can be used to determine whether a defeater can be constructed. Further, McGrath states that "in the problematic cases, there is a defeater constructible from materials in the subject's current epistemic perspective; and this is why the subject's prima facie rationality to retain his belief is defeated" (19). He argues that if a person has all the materials needed to realise that "the reasoning I used to arrive at this belief is no good", then this amounts to a defeater (McGrath 2007, 18).

Since in the case of conversion the problem is that S is not justified in forming the belief that P whilst conservatism somehow converts the situation such that, suddenly, S has justification to believe that P , McGrath can clearly show that conservatism is not committed to saying that such a belief is justified. This seems to imply that in the case of conservatism, a belief can only justifiably be maintained if the belief is justifiably formed. In other words, there is no conversion of the epistemic situation because before and after the formation of the belief, the belief was justified. However, if this is indeed McGrath's reasoning, then conservatism does not do any of the work of justification, since S is not justified in believing that P because it is merely a belief without defeaters, but because S has some justifier that made it justified to form the belief that P .

Yet, Poston (2012) takes issue with McGrath's response for another reason, arguing that it makes defeaters too liberal. Poston argues that if

the absence of evidence for or against P can serve as a defeater for prima facie justification in epistemic conservatism, then conservatism must be false since a person merely believing that P will always have a defeater for his belief and hence no such belief is ever justified under conservatism (537). It is clear that a plausible principle of justification should in fact produce justified beliefs. This is expressed by the following criterion:

Criterion 7: avoiding overly liberal defeaters

A plausible principle of justification avoids overly liberal defeaters. This means that a version of conservatism that relies on a defeat condition that is satisfied for every belief a person has, is implausible.

Poston (2012) argues that one can address the conversion problem whilst avoiding overly liberal defeaters if one introduces the following principle: “if a subject merely believes P and is unmoved by epistemological manoeuvring then the subject does not have a defeater for her belief” (537). With “epistemological manoeuvring” Poston means “roughly, [...] the use of sceptical reasoning, reasoning about underdetermination issues, or reasoning from disagreement” (537–538). The idea is that if one remains unmoved by broadly sceptical arguments, then one does not have a defeater, whereas if one is moved, then there is a defeater (538). Poston argues that many sceptical arguments share the feature that no one is moved by them. He says: “In my experience people are entirely unmoved by the Cartesian possibility of an evil demon or the possibility that they are a brain in a vat” (Poston 2012, 539).

However, such a solution is problematic because the original conversion objection is not addressed. After all, what might change the epistemic situation of S such that he was not justified in forming the belief that P, but as soon as he formed the belief, he is justified in doing so according to conservatism? Poston limits the kind of defeaters that need to be taken seriously in conservatism, which indeed deals with the problem of overly liberal defeaters and hence is an improvement on McGrath’s solution. However, as with McGrath’s solution, the problem is that conservatism requires that the mere fact that S believes that P is

sufficient (in the absence of defeaters) to justify the belief that P, but that it is not clear why the epistemic situation changes as soon as S believes that P.

The other problem with Poston's solution is that it only works for global sceptical arguments. I agree with him that it seems extremely unlikely that anyone is moved by broadly sceptical arguments, such as Descartes' evil demon argument, however, there will be many issues on which people are moved by some sort of sceptical argument. Think here of the safety of vaccinations during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst many people were not swayed by sceptical arguments pertaining to vaccine safety, a significant number of the population were. Hence, in Poston's solution, defeaters are merely descriptions of a person's psychological doubts—something that reduces justification to a very subjective form. This, once again, seems hardly a "selling point" for conservatism.

Instead, I think the solution resides in the distinction between the justification of belief formation and belief maintenance. Both McGrath and Poston have missed this crucial distinction, or at least they have failed to make it explicit. The conversion objection claims that conservatism changes the epistemic situation, yet conservatism is intended as a principle in the particular epistemic situation in which a person already has a belief. However, conservatism does not tell us whether a person should or should not form that belief. Hence, conservatism does not change the epistemic situation. One might reply that it is possible that one has formed the belief that P unjustifiably and that conservatism says one is justified in retaining it nonetheless. In other words, the real problem is that justified belief formation should be a necessary condition for justified belief maintenance, and this is not the case with conservatism. If this is the underlying problem, then Poston and McGrath were on the right track by saying that conservatism can address the issue through the defeat condition: if a belief is unjustifiably formed, then there is a defeater available for S such that, in the case of conservatism, one is not justified in retaining it. However, I concluded above that defeat conditions were problematic in their own right and hence, a different solution is necessary.

One proposal could be to consider the fact that a belief has been unjustifiably formed as a defeater if there is some positive reason to think that the belief is unjustifiably formed. Thus, if an evidential principle provides justification for belief formation, a conservative principle will provide justification for belief maintenance in the absence of a good reason to think that a belief was not formed on the basis of sufficient evidence. Or, if a reliabilist principle provides justification for belief formation, a belief is justifiably maintained in the absence of a good reason to think that a belief has not been formed reliably. Note that in this case, when justification for a belief is defeated, it is not because the belief is not justifiably formed (on the basis of evidence or because of a reliable belief-formation process), but rather because a person has a good reason to believe that it is not. This of course assumes that a good reason to believe this is not simply the absence of any awareness of the justifier for belief formation—simply believing that one has no evidence for P is not enough. Instead, the reasoning to which I allude here shows that S in fact never possessed the evidence that was necessary to justify the belief formation or that S could not have possibly formed the belief reliably because S's belief-forming processes were not functioning properly at the moment S formed the belief (for example, because of mind-altering substances). This formulation permits a connection between justified belief formation and justified belief maintenance without the latter being reduced to the former.

Yet another option is available for the conservative, namely to accept the fact that one now believes that P has properly changed the epistemic situation. So, the fact that S started believing a proposition changed the way the proposition should be evaluated. There is some evidence in natural language that supports this view, since it is common to talk about a proposition being believable or, conversely, something being absurd and hence unbelievable. Moreover, if one encounters someone that believes a proposition that one did not previously consider believing, one might give the proposition a little more thought and at least some credence compared to propositions that are not believed by anyone. This, in turn, might be explained by a minimal trustworthiness of the initial

selection of propositions we believe due to our belief-forming capacity. This might mean that any belief one has should have a higher epistemic status than an unbelieved proposition and, as such, “mere belief” should count for something. I will address this line of reasoning in more detail in chapter 7. For now, it should be clear that the conversion objection is not a straightforward defeater of the plausibility of epistemic conservatism.

5.6 Extra Boost Objection

Epistemic conservatism might be considered implausible because it gives an “extra boost” to the evidence or support for a proposition by being believed. Poston (2012) illustrates the objection as follows:

Suppose your evidence for q is counterbalanced. You then realize that there's a sound argument for q from p and $p \rightarrow q$. You appropriately believe q . Your confidence in q should be bumped up to the appropriate level given your confidence in p and $p \rightarrow q$. Suppose this confidence level is .8. Now, if conservatism is true, it looks as if you have yet another reason to raise your confidence level in q —you believe q . Suppose it bumps you up to .85. But this ‘extra boost’ of confidence is inappropriate. (535)

McGrath (2007) describes the objection as follows: “in the absence of defeating conditions, the positive epistemic status conferred by belief could combine with the positive epistemic status conferred by retained evidence to give the subject an undue extra epistemic boost” (19). From both Poston’s and McGrath’s description of the problem it is clear that if this objection is correct, then on epistemic conservatism some part of the justification for the belief that P comes out of nowhere.

McCain (2020, 204) argues that the validity of the “extra boost” objection depends on whether the “additivity of evidence principle” is true. This principle says that new evidence in favour of P will increase the justification for believing that P .³⁹ Along with Richard Feldman (2014,

39 It is assumed here that the new evidence does not result in losing old evidence, or leads to defeating evidence.

296), however, McCain (2020, 204–205) argues that this is not because we know of examples in which added evidence does not lead to a higher degree of justification. One such example reads as follows: One is certain that P on the basis of evidence, but still one gains additional evidence for P. The evidence is redundant, but it is evidence, nonetheless. McCain argues that one can construe many examples of redundant evidence, and this shows that the additivity of evidence principle is false. Hence, the extra boost objection should not be of concern to conservatives (McCain 2020, 204–205).

Poston (2012) argues that the objection fails because conservatism only applies in the context of mere belief, stating that “mere belief is the state of believing P in the absence of any good evidence for it and in the absence of any good evidence against it” (535). If one is no longer in the particular context of mere belief—i.e., one is in a context where one has good evidence for or against said belief—then conservatism no longer grants a positive epistemic status to beliefs. According to Poston (2012), “mere belief itself can generate justification, but this does not require that belief provides extra evidence for some claim” (535). McGrath (2007) also thinks that the objection fails, however, he argues that this is due to epistemic overdetermination, described as “the presence of two epistemic sources which are individually sufficient for positive epistemic status and whose combination provides no epistemic boost over what would be provided by each had the other not occurred” (20). This would mean that the proponent of conservatism can argue that the extra boost does not occur because the evidence for the belief is irrelevant for justification on conservatism and vice versa. The fact that a person holds the belief is irrelevant for justification evidentialism. In sum, justification in evidentialism and conservatism are not additive, so an extra boost cannot occur.

Both Poston and McGrath point to something essential in this discussion: having evidence for a belief is not a necessary condition for justification in epistemic conservatism. The objection tries to understand conservatism in terms of an evidentialist principle, whereas conservatism is a principle that competes with evidentialist principles. Conserva-

tism claims that there are cases in which a belief can be justified without evidence and hence the fact that “S believes that P” cannot be understood as additional evidence for the belief that P. Poston and McGrath give different solutions. Poston’s view fits better with the idea that conservatism can only provide a very weak positive epistemic status—he even names conservatism a means of last resort (Poston 2012, 535)—whereas McGrath’s view is compatible with the acquisition of a stronger positive epistemic status through conservatism. In both cases, the extra boost objection fails because evidence is considered irrelevant and hence there is no extra boost in the first place.

Nonetheless, it is a deep-seated intuition that evidence for a claim is important, and hence a principle of justification that simply ignores evidence is implausible. If one takes this intuition seriously, as many epistemologists undoubtedly do, evidence must be accommodated within a principle of justification. Evidence does not have to be a necessary condition for justification, but it should have a function within the principle. The following criterion expresses this:

Criterion 8: avoiding evidential ignorance

In a plausible principle of justification, evidence related to a belief is not ignored—evidence has a function in the principle.

In conservatism, evidence can only play a role in the defeat condition (evidence against the belief that P) or, more indirectly, in changing the degree of the belief that can be justified according to conservatism. First, a conservative can allow for counterevidence to defeat the justification for a belief. Second, evidence can change the degree of the belief that is justified. If it is a fact that S believes that P to a certain degree, then a change in that degree due to evidence would change the fact that S believes that P. For example, if S believes that P with a degree of 0.8 and then comes across a piece of evidence such that this degree of belief would increase to 0.9, then it is the fact that S believes that P with a degree of 0.9 that is the necessary condition for justification of belief maintenance on conservatism. Of course, this assumes that degrees of belief are possible,

and that evidence is connected to these degrees. Nonetheless, this could be a way in which conservatism can become evidence-sensitive without being liable to the extra boost objection.

In conclusion, the extra boost objection fundamentally misunderstands the nature of justification in conservatism—namely that justification does not come from evidence and that the extra boost only occurs if one assumes that it does. Although conservatism should be “evidence-sensitive”, there are ways in which this is possible without requiring evidence for a belief as a necessary condition for justification.

5.7 Partiality Objection

Yet another objection is that epistemic conservatism arbitrarily favours a person’s own beliefs over those of other people—in other words, that conservatism is partial. An example is provided by David Christensen (2000), who suggests that conservatism violates the following general principle in epistemology:

Principle of Epistemic Impartiality: the considerations determining which beliefs it would be epistemically rational for an agent to adopt, do not give special status to any of the agent’s present opinions on the basis of their belonging to the agent. (363–364)

For Christensen, a violation of this principle is a problem because the identity of the agent holding the belief is irrelevant to the “reasonableness” of the belief. He argues that epistemology is “an enterprise whose proper concern is limited to the detached pursuit of truth, or accuracy” (Christensen 2000, 363). McGrath (2007) summarises the objection as follows: “Conservatism wrongly makes the fact that your beliefs are yours relevant to the question of what you should believe” (16, emphasis in original). In other words, the fact that S1’s belief that P is his attitude should not count epistemically towards the question whether it is rational to retain the belief that P.

Poston (2012) replies to this by challenging the idea that partiality is a problem in the first place. He argues that we should take the perspec-

tival character of the truth goal seriously. He suggests that the tension between the detached pursuit of truth and the supposed partiality of conservatism “lies at the centre of many objections to conservatism” (534). For Poston, conservatism is supported by the claim that, in order to attain the truth goal, a person must rely on their own perspective and has a right to do so. In this way, Poston argues, the partiality objection is defused because it was fundamentally mistaken about the way in which the truth goal is attained. Poston argues that, in order to achieve the truth goal, a person uses “doxastic forming practices” (524). These practices are in turn dependent on a subject’s perspective: “her various beliefs about what constitute reliable and unreliable methods” (524). According to Poston, this dependence on a subject’s perspective is not problematic because “we are right to rely on our beliefs to evaluate the acceptability of other claims” (525). Poston claims that because we need to rely on our perspective to acquire the belief-forming practices we need for epistemic justification, the beliefs that make up this perspective need to have some positive epistemic value since that is needed to achieve the truth goal in the first place (Poston 2012, 526).

In Poston’s (2012) argument, only those beliefs that are needed to guide our doxastic forming practices are beliefs that are justified by conservatism. Although Poston does not go into detail which beliefs are needed to guide our practices, he does seem to limit them to “various beliefs about what constitute reliable and unreliable methods (or, minimally, relative strength of reliability)” (Poston 2012, 524). If we take the general concept of conservatism to be that *prima facie* any belief is justified, then Poston is no longer defending this general concept of conservatism because he argues that only a relatively small set of beliefs are *prima facie* justified. However, this begs the question as to why those beliefs can be justified using conservatism, but other beliefs cannot. The argument that we need conservatively justified beliefs because we depend on our own perspective in our doxastic forming practices does not make clear why conservatism can justify only those beliefs. It seems that either the dependence on our own perspective is not a problem (because conservatism is plausible and hence it can be applied to any belief) or

conservatism is not plausible and using our own perspective is problematic. In any case, the partiality objection still holds.

McGrath's (2007) response to the partiality objection is to say that conservatism does not lead to partiality: "conservatism is perfectly consistent with claiming that it is not the fact that the belief is mine which ultimately makes it worthy of my trust but the fact that it is a belief" (17). According to McGrath, we can trust another's belief as equally as we can trust our own. Although he says that a limited self-other asymmetry can be expected because one needs to infer that someone else has a belief from awareness about that belief, he also thinks this does not create any substantial problems for conservatism (McGrath 2007).

However, I believe McGrath to be mistaken. What he refers to as a "limited asymmetry" is in fact a fundamental difference between one person's belief and another person's belief. It is very clear that for conservatism, the fact that a person S1 has a belief that P1 is a necessary condition for justifying that belief for S1, whilst the fact that another person S2 has a belief that P2 does not (yet) justify anything for S1. It is easy to see why, since as long as S1 does not hold that P2, there is no object of justification: it simply is an unbelieved proposition on which conservatism has no bearing for S1. Of course, if S1 also starts believing that P2, then retaining the belief that P2 can be justified for S1, but whether S2 is justified to form the belief that P2 is beyond the scope of conservatism.

So, does the simple fact that something is a belief not imply that any belief anyone has is also justified for anyone else? If so, this would mean that conservatism implies something like the following principle: if S1 believes that P and S2 is aware of this belief, then, in the absence of defeaters for P, S2 is justified to believe that P. I think this is not the case because from S's perspective, there is a fundamental asymmetry between S's beliefs and the beliefs of someone else: the former are internal to S, whereas the latter are external to S. The fact that the beliefs of others are external means that in order for S to justifiably retain them, they first need to be justifiably formed. To do this, a principle of justified belief formation is required, however, conservatism is not committed to

a particular principle of justified belief formation. Hence, conservatism has a self-other asymmetry that ultimately implies that the fact that another person holds a belief does not necessarily make it justified for me to form that belief also.

Does this mean that the partiality objection to conservatism still stands? Yes, but not because there is something wrong with conservatism. It is the distinction between justified belief formation and justified belief maintenance that causes the self-other asymmetry. In order to retain a belief, one necessarily needs to have formed the belief, but this also necessarily falls beyond the scope of any principle of justified belief maintenance. It is not obvious that the same conditions necessarily apply to justified belief maintenance and justified belief formation, and hence a self-other asymmetry should not be surprising.⁴⁰ Because this applies to every principle of justified belief maintenance, I do not think the partiality objection threatens the plausibility of conservatism.

5.8 Unwarranted Assertion Objection

According to Christensen (1994), epistemic conservatism allows a person to say: “I happen to believe it—and that is part of my justification for continuing to believe it” (69). Although rarely explicitly named as such, this objection represents possibly the most common objection to conservatism. Essentially, the objection tries to show the implausibility of conservatism by showing that implausible assertions are allowed to be made if one accepts conservatism.

Poston (2012) argues that the seeming implausibility of these assertions, and hence conservatism, are misleading due to the very nature of assertion and its implications. Regarding the assertion in Christensen’s introduction, he says that “this assertion creates the improper expectation that one’s belief is evidentially relevant to the conversation at

40 Note that I also do not exclude the possibility that the conditions could be the same. Reid’s (1997, 190–202) principle of credulity—that we should trust the testimony of someone else unless we have reasons to doubt it—seems to be a principle of justified belief formation that comes very close to the idea that the mere fact that another person believes that P makes it justified for me to believe that P.

hand" (Poston 2012, 529). For example, if someone asserts "I believe that the sun will shine today and part of my justification for believing that the sun will shine is the fact that I believe it", it becomes clear that the fact that one has a belief is introduced in the form of evidence for the belief. Poston reiterates Paul Grice's notion that "pragmatic aspects of conversational contexts can generate false expectations" (Poston 2012, 529). Poston (2012) illustrates this via the example of seeing a black and white striped equine in a zoo with a sign next to it saying "Zebra". If one were to assert at that moment that "this animal is not a cleverly disguised mule", one would improperly create the false expectation that one has special evidence for this assertion. Poston argues that the same false expectation is created by asserting conservative justification in the way Christensen does: "When one has merely conservative justification for P, one's conservative justification is unassertable" (Poston 2012, 530, emphasis in original). If P is questioned, the assertion "I believe that P" creates the expectation that the fact that one believes that P is relevant for the discussion. Hence, it is sometimes wrong to say that one is conservatively justified in believing that P, even though one is still justified in believing that P, according to Poston (2012, 530). For him, this means that conservative justification is "small", in the sense that "in challenged contexts conservative justification is unassertable" (Poston 2012, 530).

Poston's observation might be valuable in making sense of some seemingly counterintuitive assertions of conservatism. However, conservatism would be significantly less interesting if its justification could never be asserted. Hence, Poston's solution would reduce the appeal of conservatism. Luckily, justification can be more often asserted than Poston might have us believe. For example, Christensen's example is only counterintuitive because it seems as if a circular justification is given (S believes that P because S believes that P). However, a fairer assertion on the basis of conservatism would be something like this: "I believe that P and I have no reason to doubt it, so I am justified in continuing to believe that P." In a more natural form, it could be expressed thus: "Should we turn left on this road to get home?" "Yes, I think so." "Are

you sure?" "I am pretty sure and I don't see why not." This seems to be a perfectly reasonable assertion, and even though it is made in a slightly contested context, conservatism can still give justification. So, it seems that Poston undersold conservatism here. Of course, in cases where a person asks to be convinced of a proposition (by asking for justification for belief formation), conservatism is not applicable because it only deals with the justification of belief maintenance. Therefore, assertions of justification due to conservatism must be precise in that they do not imply that a person formed a belief on the basis of that belief. In such cases, counterintuitive results are not expected. Hence, I do not think this objection is harmful for conservatism and hence it does not need to be taken into account in an evaluation thereof.

5.9 Over-permissiveness Objection

An additional objection comes from the idea that epistemic conservatism allows beliefs to be justified too easily. Hamid Vahid (2004) calls this the problem of over-permissiveness and argues that it makes epistemic conservatism implausible. Moreover, he argues that conservatism cannot be made plausible without becoming epistemically uninteresting. Vahid understands conservatism as claiming that "any belief a cognizer happens to hold (irrespective of how it is acquired) as possessing some rationality" (114).⁴¹ It seems that Vahid's objection to this understanding of conservatism is that it does not help a person to achieve the truth goal. Clearly, if every belief is justified according to conservatism, then conservatism will not help us to discriminate between true and false beliefs.

Vahid (2004) argues that Chisholm's conservatism is especially vulnerable to this objection, since it even permits beliefs to be justified that are unresponsive to the world surrounding us. Perhaps, Vahid suggests, Chisholm's conservatism can be amended so that "any proposition an agent comes to believe as a response to his (relevant) environment has some presumption of rationality (provided it does not explicitly contra-

41 Note that Vahid uses the notions "rationality" and "justification" interchangeably.

dict the rest of what he believes)" (114). However, such an adaptation would also be insufficient, "as it fails to provide us with an account of the boundaries of the notion of rationality it involves" (114). Moreover, he states that conservatism employs "a weak and subjective notion of rationality that is not necessarily a good indicator or means to truth" and this makes conservatism limited in its potential (Vahid 2004, 117–118).

Vahid (2004) argues that the same goes for Lycan's principle of credulity (118). This principle takes "spontaneous beliefs" as *prima facie* justified as long as those beliefs are logical, consistent with previously justified explanatory beliefs, and all of one's beliefs can explain the origin of the spontaneous belief in question (Lycan 1988, 157–177). According to Vahid (2004), the constraints of Lycan were necessary to prevent the principle of credulity becoming over-permissive. However, the consequence of these constraints is that it seems difficult to determine whether a spontaneous belief is consistent with all of the previously justified explanatory beliefs one has. In addition, Vahid suggests that the third constraint—the requirement for explanation—is argued for in a way that takes Lycan's principle "too close to a version of the reliability account to count as an independently legitimate and substantial conservative thesis" (Vahid 2004, 119). Hence, conservatism not only seems to be over-permissive; repairing it also appears to be too difficult.

There are various ways in which a principle of justification can justify too much. It could justify each and every belief; it could justify beliefs that obviously should not be justified; or it could assign too high a degree to a belief. Conservatism does justify each and every belief in a *prima facie* way: the fact that a belief is held by a person is sufficient for *prima facie* justification. However, this is not a problem, since it merely implies that a belief is justified prior to being exposed to defeaters. The defeat condition in conservatism ensures that not each and every belief is justified (unless, that is, the defeat condition is so liberal that no belief can be defeated). Therefore, if conservatism is too permissive, then it has to be because of something else: it justifies the unjustifiable. Various propositions come to mind, such as "there is a teapot owned by Bertrand Russell floating in space", "Zeus lives on Mount Olympus in Greece", or

“the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything is 42”. If a theory of justification justifies believing these propositions, then most epistemologists will probably agree that it is neither a good theory nor a principle of justification.⁴² Yet many other propositions are more controversial to use as a test for the plausibility of a theory of justification, for example: “God exists”, “morality is objective”, or “there is intelligent extra-terrestrial biological life”. Hence, there is only a crude test for the plausibility of a principle of justification.

Is epistemic conservatism especially liable to justifying the unjustifiable? It might appear so, since many of the objections to conservatism we have dealt with so far share the idea that conservatism justifies something that should not be justified—the implication being that other theories of justification do not share this problem. However, the reason for this seems to be that the crude test is only applied to a limited number of versions of conservatism without objectors trying particularly hard to see if other versions of conservatism would be more plausible. In other words, any apparent over-permissiveness might be due to a lack of academic attention. Perhaps if more exploration is done, more plausible versions of conservatism will be created that might also reveal versions that are not overly permissive. In the next chapter, I address a version of conservatism that seems less permissive and in general this thesis hopes to contribute to this exploration. Perhaps even more important, there does not seem to be a principal reason why conservatism is necessarily too permissive, since this will only be the case if defeat conditions cannot sufficiently exclude beliefs that should not be justified. However, *prima facie* there does not seem to be a reason to think that relying on defeat conditions will allow more unjustified than justified beliefs than, for example, relying on evidentialist conditions in which a belief is only justified if there is sufficient evidence for a belief.

42 One can notice a variation of the problem of the criterion here. It seems to me that there is some agreement in the literature that there are at least a number of beliefs, such as those given, that are considered to be part of the set of beliefs that ought not to be justified by a theory of justification. Hence, there seems to be some form of particularism at work here.

Finally, conservatism might assign too high a degree of justification. In general, it seems that conservatives often assign a relatively low degree of justification to beliefs justified on conservatism, for example, as Chisholm and Kvanvig did. There are also versions in which justification does not come in degrees, for example McCain's, to which I turn in the next chapter. Conservatism is not committed to a particular stance and there is no particular reason to think that the degree of justification is necessarily too high. Unless, of course, one thinks that no belief can be justified on conservatism, but then the problem is not really over-permissiveness at all. Therefore, conservatism is not necessarily over-permissive and the objection does not hold.

5.10 Conclusion

In this and previous chapters I have addressed most, if not all, of the objections against conservatism. I have formulated criteria for the plausibility of a theory of justification based on these objections that were not based on misunderstanding conservatism or were otherwise defective. If a version of conservatism can satisfy all these criteria, it should be plausible because none of the addressed objections will stand against that version. Hence, with these criteria I have created a method for evaluating and comparing versions of epistemic conservatism. Such a method could also make more efficient and manageable the formulation of a version of conservatism that is not susceptible to the objections cited above.

Chapter 6

McCain's Conservatism

A recent contribution to the ongoing epistemic conservatism debate, defending a new version of conservatism, has been put forward by Kevin McCain (2008). In this chapter, based on the criteria formulated in previous chapters, I discuss and evaluate this intervention. However, despite the fact that McCain's version presents important improvements—not least that it can deal with many of the objections against conservatism—this comes at a cost, namely, that it is no longer conservative.

6.1 McCain's Version

McCain (2008) states that “epistemic conservatism is the view that holding a belief provides at least some justification for it” (186). Although previous versions have been shown to be implausible, McCain argues that conservatism can be salvaged.⁴³ His proposal for this is his “properly formulated epistemic conservatism” (PEC):

PEC:

If S believes that P and P is not incoherent, then S is justified in retaining the belief that P and S remains justified in believing that P so long as P is not defeated for S.

Defeat Condition 1 (DC1):

If S has better reasons for believing that $\neg P$ than S's reasons for believing that P, then S is no longer justified in believing that P.

Defeat Condition 2 (DC2):

If S has reasons for believing that $\neg P$ which are as good as S's reasons for believing that P and the belief that $\neg P$ coheres equally as well or better than the belief that P does with S's other beliefs, then S is no longer justified in believing that P. (186)

McCain provides two clarifications. First, the belief that P is not itself a reason for believing that P for S. This means that in DC1 the belief that P is not to be used as a reason for assessing the comparative strength of the reasons for believing that P or believing that $\neg P$. Second, the belief that P should not be included in the set of S's other beliefs that DC2 refers to. Therefore, the set of beliefs that is used to assess whether the belief that $\neg P$ coheres equally well or better than the belief that P cannot itself include, P since the belief that P would always cohere better with itself

43 In a later work, he points out that there can be both static and dynamic versions of conservatism. He says that PEC is an example of dynamic conservatism since it is about the status of belief retention rather than the status of a belief at a particular time (McCain 2020, 211, endnote 16).

than with the belief that $\neg P$ and would therefore skew the outcome. The same goes for beliefs that are directly dependent on the belief that P for their justification—for example, the belief that Q . Being directly dependent means that “the belief that Q [is] such that if S did not have the belief that P , then S would not be justified in believing Q ” (187). This also includes beliefs that are dependent for their justification on a belief that is itself dependent on the belief that P , so a belief that R that is dependent on the belief that Q is also dependent on the belief that P . Including such beliefs would also skew the outcome, because “beliefs that are dependent upon the belief that P for their justification will cohere better with the belief that P than with the belief that $\neg P$ ” (McCain 2008, 187).

An example might help in understanding PEC. Let us take the coin-toss example again. Imagine that a person tosses a coin and believes, without looking, that “the coin landed heads up”. The belief seems coherent. Hence, according to PEC, this person is justified in continuing to believe that “the coin landed heads up” as long as it is not defeated. If we assume that this person has no reason to believe that “the coin landed heads up” and does not have any reason to believe its negation, then according to DC1, the belief that “the coin landed heads up” is not defeated for this person. However, with this same assumption DC2 defeats the justification. Since S has equally good reasons for believing that “the coin landed heads up” as for believing that “the coin landed tails up”, and these beliefs cohere equally well with all the other beliefs S has, DC2 is satisfied, meaning that S is not justified in retaining his belief.

However, there is an ambiguity in DC2 that McCain leaves unclarified: the status of $\neg P$ in the second conjunct of the antecedent in DC2. Is $\neg P$ a belief that S has or not? A plain reading would suggest that it is, since because DC2 mentions the belief that $\neg P$ and not just the proposition that $\neg P$. However, McCain does not say that the belief that $\neg P$ and beliefs that are directly dependent on the belief that $\neg P$ should not be included in the set of other beliefs mentioned in DC2, even though he does exclude the belief that P and beliefs directly dependent on the belief that P from the set of beliefs in DC2. If $\neg P$ is a belief of S rather than simply the proposition that $\neg P$, then this means that the defeat condition only applies in

cases in which *S* believes both that *P* and that $\neg P$. This means that in the example of the coin toss, the belief that “the coin landed heads up” can only be defeated by DC2 if *S* also believes that “the coin landed tails up”. This seems to make the defeat condition quite narrow and appears very similar to Chisholm’s version of conservatism. Although it is possible that this was McCain’s intention, the absence of any mention of the importance of believing both that *P* and that $\neg P$ suggests otherwise. It seems, therefore, that we should not understand $\neg P$ as a belief *S* has, or rather, not necessarily a belief *S* has. In this case, it means that the fact that a person believes a proposition, whether *P* or $\neg P$, is irrelevant in DC2. In this chapter, I take this to be the correct understanding of DC2—something that can be formulated as follows:

Defeat Condition 2 (DC2*):*

*If *S* has reasons for believing that $\neg P$ that are as good as *S*’s reasons for believing that *P* and the proposition that $\neg P$ coheres equally as well or better than the belief that *P* does with *S*’s other beliefs, then *S* is no longer justified in believing that *P*.*

6.2 The Virtues of McCain’s Conservatism

McCain (2008, 187-195) argues that his version of conservatism has many virtues and that, given its resilience to objections, it should be considered plausible. In the following, I examine these virtues in greater detail.

6.2.1 Making sense of our intuitions

According to McCain, PEC explains the intuition that “when the need to revise our beliefs occurs we should try to revise our set of beliefs piece by piece instead of in totality” (187). PEC shows that one should not abandon all beliefs at once; rather, only those that we have reason to reject (187–188). The second intuition PEC offers is that “our spontaneously formed memory beliefs are justified” (188). Such beliefs include remembering one’s name, phone number, or the way home. PEC shows that we can be justified in holding on to a memory belief even though it seems that these beliefs cannot be justified by “any kind of sense percep-

tion or distinctive memory experience" (188). Finally, McCain says that PEC explains the intuition of "cases of forgotten evidence, i.e. instances where we have a justified belief, but we have forgotten the evidence/reasons that justified our forming the belief" (188). He uses the example of learning relativity theory and forming the belief that " $E=mc^2$ ". Even if one forgets the evidence that one had once learned, McCain suggests that our intuition that the belief that " $E=mc^2$ " is still justified is explained by PEC (McCain 2008).

6.2.2 Response to Alternative Hypotheses Scepticism

According to McCain (2008, 189), another virtue of PEC is that it provides a plausible way to respond to the kind of scepticism that makes use of alternative hypotheses—for example, that of René Descartes in his *Meditations*. McCain summarises the argument by saying:

This argument purports to prove that our commonsense belief in the existence of an external world is not justified because we have no better reason to believe in the existence of an external world than to believe rival hypotheses such as that we are dreaming or being deceived by Descartes' Demon, or that we are brains in vats, etc. (189)

The conservative response, using PEC, is to argue that we are justified in maintaining the belief that "there is an external world" even if there are alternative hypotheses for which we have the same degree of evidence as we have for the belief that "there is an external world" because we in fact believe that "there is an external world". This belief is not incoherent and the defeat conditions, DC1 and DC2, are not satisfied, McCain argues. DC1 is not satisfied because the evidence for the alternative hypotheses is on a par with the belief that "there is an external world". Hence, S has no better reasons to believe the alternative hypotheses. DC2 is not satisfied either because the belief that "there is an external world" coheres better with other (common-sense) beliefs we have, such as "I ate breakfast this morning" or "the sun is shining bright today", than with the alternative hypotheses. He also points out that these beliefs do not directly depend

on the belief that “there is an external world” because these beliefs are not inferred from that belief. Since the alternative hypotheses do not cohere as well with these beliefs, DC2 is not satisfied either. Hence, McCain concludes, contrary to the conclusion of alternative hypotheses scepticism, we are justified in believing that “there is an external world” in virtue of PEC (McCain 2008, 189–190).

Regarding DC1, McCain indeed seems to be correct in saying that there are no better reasons for alternative hypotheses, such as “I am dreaming” or “I am a brain-in-a-vat”, than for the belief that “there is an external world”. This is also something the sceptic would probably say, since the sceptic’s argument merely hinges on the impossibility of excluding the alternative hypothesis.

However, in the case of DC2, McCain’s reasoning becomes trickier. McCain claims that whilst there is no dependence relation between common-sense beliefs and the belief that “there is an external world”, this can, nonetheless, be challenged. After all, many common-sense beliefs seem to presuppose the existence of an external world. For example, a common-sense reading of the belief that “I ate breakfast this morning” would be that I, a person with awareness and with a body that exists in a world external both to my awareness and awareness of that body, exercised some control on this body (namely eating) in order for it to effect changes (namely consuming nutritious objects) in the same external world as where my body is, at a particular point in time in that external world (namely this morning). It is hard to understand how this belief can be understood differently and so consequently it seems that the belief in an external world is presupposed by the common-sense belief. It appears that there are indeed some interdependences between the belief that “there is an external world” and that “I ate breakfast this morning”. Yet does this kind of dependence skew the defeat condition in the same way the entailment relation can?

Perhaps McCain’s reply would be that this is in fact the coherence relation that will prevent the belief that “there is an external world” to be defeated and the absence of it will defeat the sceptical alternative hypotheses. However, if this is the case, then one may wonder whether

conservatism is really needed in the first place. Assuming that a common-sense belief is immediately justified, the belief that "I ate breakfast this morning" is justified, but would the belief that is presupposed by this belief then not also be justified in the same manner? In other words, is the belief in an external world not also a common-sense belief and hence immediately justified? If so, then it is not PEC that has saved us from scepticism, but the immediate justification that stems from common-sense beliefs. Although I do not think that this makes PEC implausible, it does call for a degree of restraint when dealing with the sceptical alternative hypotheses.

Beyond this particular response, presupposing the belief that P for a belief, say Q, from the set of S's other beliefs, does seem like an issue for PEC to me. If presupposing the belief that P for the belief that Q can indeed be considered a direct dependence between the target belief and S's other beliefs, then there will be more cases in which the proposition that $\neg P$ will cohere equally well, or worse, than the belief that P does with S's other beliefs. This in turn means that DC2 will be satisfied more often, and the set of beliefs justified according to PEC becomes smaller. Hence, the scope of PEC is determined by one's evaluation of whether the presupposition that P for believing that Q constitutes a "direct dependence" between the beliefs that P and that Q, or not.

6.2.3 Response to the Problem of Easy Knowledge

Another virtue of PEC, McCain (2008, 190–195) argues, is that it avoids the "Problem of Easy Knowledge": the intuition that "knowledge" that is acquired on the basis of the presumed reliability of the source of that knowledge is too easily called knowledge. Steward Cohen (2005) argues that this problem arises in all basic knowledge structure theories. According to Cohen (2005), a theory has a basic knowledge structure (BKS) "just in case we have basic knowledge and we come to know our faculties are reliable on the basis of our basic knowledge" (417). Cohen (2005) has described two version of this problem: i) the bootstrapping version and ii) the closure version.

In the bootstrapping version, evidence of the reliability “y” of the knowledge source is acquired by the instances of the knowledge source being used. Cohen (2002) gives the following example:

Imagine [...] my 7 year old son asking me if my colour-vision is reliable. I say, “Let’s check it out.” I set up a slide show in which the screen will change colours every few seconds. I observe, “That screen is red and I believe it’s red. Got it right that time. Now it’s blue and, look at that, I believe it’s blue. Two for two.” I trust that no one thinks that whereas I previously did not have any evidence for the reliability of my colour vision, I am now actually acquiring evidence for the reliability of my colour vision. (317)

In the example the father gathers evidence for the reliability of the knowledge source simply by using that source and using it often enough will lead to sufficient evidence for the father to have knowledge of the reliability of his knowledge source. According to Cohen (2002), this is too easy.

McCain (2008) says there are three possible ways of understanding the example in relation to conservatism:

Option 1: the father has the belief that his colour vision is reliable, and he has evidence for this belief;

Option 2: the father has the belief that his colour vision is reliable but has forgotten his evidence;

Option 3: the father does not have the belief that his colour vision is reliable and has forgotten the evidence. (191)

According to McCain, the belief that his colour vision is reliable is justified according to PEC in all three instances. As soon as the father holds the belief, it is justified unless the defeat conditions are satisfied. In option 1, the defeat conditions are not satisfied because the possible

evidence from the slide show is only relevant if it serves as defeating evidence. Since this is not the case, the evidence is irrelevant. The same goes for option 2. The absence of evidence supporting the belief is not relevant for justification on PEC. Option 3 is different because the father believes that his colour vision is reliable after the slide show. McCain thinks that in this case, Cohen would want to claim that “the evidence that the father uses to bootstrap his way to his belief that his colour vision is reliable does not provide him with reasons to believe that his colour vision is reliable” (192). However, even if this is the case, the father would not have better reasons to believe that his colour vision is unreliable, and hence DC1 is still not met. Moreover, says McCain, DC2 is not met either because the father’s belief that his colour vision is reliable coheres better with the father’s other beliefs, such as the belief that he is able to identify colours in order to engage in the slide show, than with the belief that his colour vision is unreliable. This means that the father is justified in believing that his colour vision is reliable and that this does not depend on bootstrapping. Therefore, McCain argues, the bootstrapping version of the problem of easy knowledge is not problematic for PEC (McCain 2008, 192–193).

The closure version of the problem uses the closure principle, which says that if S knows that P and knows that P entails Q, then S can know that Q through deduction. The problem of easy knowledge can then be seen in the following example by Cohen (2005): A son that wants a red table is uncertain whether the table in the store is actually red or a white table appearing red because a red light is shining upon it. The father reasons that because it looks red, it is red and not white illuminated by a red light. However, according to Cohen, the father cannot rule out that in this case that the table is a white table illuminated by red lights (417–419). Even if the father knows that his colour vision is reliable on the basis of evidence, the problem of easy knowledge remains. According to Cohen, this can be seen by the following reasoning the father employs:

- (1) [My inductive evidence for the reliability of colour vision]
- (2) Colour vision of the sort I'm employing right now is reliable and the table looks red.
- (3) The table is red.
- (4) If the table is red, it is not white with red lights shining on it.
- (5) Therefore, the table is not white with red lights shining on it. (193)

Cohen further argues that

even though [the] inductive evidence makes the probability of deceptive lighting very low, [the father] nonetheless fails to know that in this very case, the improbable deception is not occurring. [That is why the] son is questioning whether (1), even though it supports (the first conjunct of) (2), really does support (5). The problem is that even if (1) does not by itself support (5), if (1) supports (2), then the reasoning can proceed all the way to (5) via (2)-(4). (Cohen 2005, 420-421)

The challenge for conservatism, suggests McCain (2008), is “to explain the intuitions that are the driving force behind Cohen’s example in a way that still allows for basic knowledge” (193–194). McCain argues that “given PEC, there is no problem with the father in Cohen’s example being justified in believing (5) [that the table is not white with red lights shining on it]” (194). According to PEC, the father is justified in continuing to believe that the table is not white with red lights shining on it as long as this belief is not defeated for him. McCain does not consider DC1 to be met because there are no better reasons to believe the negation of the father’s belief “that the table is not white illuminated with red lights” (McCain 2008).

In addition, McCain (2008) considers the first part of DC2 to be met because the reasons for the belief that “the table is not white illuminated with red lights” and the reasons for its negation are equally good. However, he does not consider the second part of DC2 to be met because the father’s belief that “the table is not white illuminated with red lights” coheres better with the father’s other beliefs, such as the belief that

“things are not often disguised to look one colour when they are in fact a different colour” (McCain 2008).

McCain (2008, 194) therefore concludes that according to PEC, the father is justified in believing that “the table is not white illuminated with red lights”. McCain explains that if one would stipulate that the father’s other beliefs actually cohere equally or better with the belief that the table is white illuminated by red lights, then DC2 would be met, and the father’s belief would be defeated. According to McCain, the way Cohen presents the case might give rise to the thought that the beliefs cohere equally well. However, McCain states:

If the belief that the table is red and the belief that the table is a white table illuminated by red lights cohered equally well with the father’s other beliefs, then it seems that he would not form a belief about the colour of the table simply by looking at it. (194–195)

Hence, McCain suggests, it is more plausible that the father’s belief coheres better with his other beliefs. In any case, he concludes that “PEC provided the correct response in regard to the father having or lacking justification for his belief that the table is not white but illuminated by red lights” (McCain 2008, 195).

It is important to take note of two points in McCain’s argument that PEC avoids the problem of easy knowledge. First, PEC is not a theory with a basic knowledge structure, as it only deals with justification. Hence, PEC does not provide a response to the problem of easy knowledge, but to a derivative thereof, namely, the problem of easy justification. However, McCain does not make this explicit in the way he relates PEC to the two versions of the problem of easy knowledge. Since justification is clearly different to knowledge, it helps the argument if the relation between the two is clearly established. The second point is that in the responses to both versions of the problem, McCain relies on assumptions regarding a person’s other beliefs in dealing with DC2. Since the coherence with other beliefs is crucial for whether a belief is defeated or not, there seems to be a risk that justification according to PEC depends on the assumptions

about a person's other beliefs. This risk could have been mitigated by providing a more elaborate description of coherence and a more methodical way of determining which other beliefs can be assumed to be held by the person in the cases presented.

6.3 Evaluation of McCain's Conservatism

In this section I evaluate McCain's conservatism using the criteria for the plausibility of a principle of justification previously formulated.

6.3.1 Criterion 1: avoiding infinite regression

A plausible principle of justification does not require a person S to believe an infinite number of propositions in order for a belief that P to be justified for S.

At first glance, PEC does not seem to require an infinite number of beliefs in order to generate or sustain justification. After all, a belief can be justified without inference from another belief as long as the defeat conditions are not satisfied. However, these defeat conditions require closer scrutiny before we can say that this criterion is satisfied.

The first defeat condition (DC1) says that justification for believing that P is defeated if S has better reasons for believing that $\neg P$ than for believing that P. One might argue that if the possession of reasons is crucial for the justification of the belief that P, then the infinite regress problem is just a step away. After all, an infinite regress of reasons starts with the norm that reasons for a belief are a necessary condition for justification. However, the defeat condition does not necessarily require a reason for justification. It is possible that S has only one reason for believing that P and no reasons for believing that $\neg P$, or that S has no reasons for believing either P or $\neg P$. In such cases, S does not have better reasons for believing that $\neg P$ rather than P. Hence, the defeat condition is not satisfied and the belief that P can be justified without the need for an infinite number of reasons.

According to the second defeat condition (DC2), which becomes relevant if the reasons for P and $\neg P$ are equally good, P needs to cohere better with the other beliefs S has than $\neg P$ in order to avoid a defeater. Coherence can be understood as being consistent with another belief or even a mutually supporting relation between beliefs. For example, the belief that it is cold outside coheres well with the belief that it is winter, since both beliefs are not only consistent with each other, but also support each other: we are in the winter season and hence it is likely to be cold, and when it is cold outside it is more likely that we are in winter. If a belief coheres with a set of beliefs, it is not necessary to have an additional reason for that belief in order for that coherence to obtain. Thus, if one belief coheres better with a set of beliefs than another belief does, there is nothing that triggers an infinite regress. Hence, this criterion is satisfied.

6.3.2 Criterion 2: avoiding circularity

A plausible principle of justification avoids circularity such that the belief that P is not justified by a chain of reasons that is grounded in the belief that P itself.

In the context of this criterion, McCain's conservatism is not circular, as can be seen in an argument that shows justification for his version of conservatism:

1. If S believes that P and P is not incoherent, then S is justified in retaining the belief that P and S remains justified in believing that P for so long as P is not defeated for S ;
2. If S has better reasons for believing that $\neg P$ than S 's reasons for believing that P , then S is no longer justified in believing that P ;
3. If S has reasons for believing that $\neg P$ which are as good as S 's reasons for believing that P and the belief that $\neg P$ coheres equally as well or better than the belief that P does with S 's other beliefs, then S is no longer justified in believing that P ;

4. S believes that P;
5. P is not incoherent;
6. S does not have better reasons for believing that $\neg P$ than for believing that P;
7. The belief that P coheres better with S's other beliefs than the proposition that $\neg P$;

8. Therefore, S is justified in retaining the belief that P.

Although the justificatory argument does not re-use a premise as its conclusion, one might wonder whether there are hidden premisses that would ultimately show that justification is based on circular reasoning. In the above argument, premise 7 might be suspect, since coherence is often associated with circular reasoning. In coherentist theories of epistemic justification, the argument is that an infinite regress can be avoided because a belief is justified by virtue of being part of a set of beliefs that cohere with each other. One way of viewing the coherence relation amongst beliefs is linear in nature: an inferential line from premises to conclusions through which beliefs are mutually supported. Thus, a belief that P is coherently justified because it is inferred from the belief that Q, which is itself justified because it is inferred from P. Such a view is circular and would make McCain's second defeat condition problematic.

However, coherentists have argued that they do not take this linear approach to justification, but rather favour a holistic view in which the system of beliefs is justified as a whole, and an individual belief is justified by virtue of its being a member of this system (BonJour 1985, 89–92). What the coherency relationship between beliefs amounts to is a matter of debate that includes the question whether it is possibly to have a non-circular coherence relationship amongst beliefs at all (Olsson 2021). It would exceed the scope of this section to delve deeper into this discussion, however, it is clear that McCain's conservatism is not directly circular, nor does it depend on a direct form of circularity in one of its premises and, in that sense at least, it satisfies this criterion. Nonetheless, regarding circularity, McCain does make his theory dependent on one's commitments in the discussion on coherentism.

6.3.3 Criterion 3: avoiding arbitrariness

A plausible principle of justification is able to explain the difference between a justified and an unjustified belief.

In PEC, the difference between a justified and an unjustified belief hinges upon a belief's internal coherence and the defeat conditions: a justified belief is justified by virtue of it being a coherent belief for which the defeat conditions are not satisfied, and an unjustified belief is unjustified either because it is not coherent in itself or because the defeat conditions are satisfied. Hence, arbitrariness is avoided. However, all is not well, because in order to achieve this, PEC seems to "smuggle in" additional conditions for justification that obscure the actual source of justification. It seems that a belief is either justified inferentially or through a coherence relation. In both cases we can wonder whether this is epistemic conservatism and hence whether PEC can actually lay claim to the virtues of conservatism at all.

To expand upon this, let me first spell out the different cases in which a belief is justified or unjustified according to PEC. In the interests of brevity, I will only deal with beliefs that are coherent in themselves:

1. S believes that P, has no reasons for believing that P, and has no reasons for believing that \neg P either.
2. S believes that P, has no reasons for believing that P, and has reasons for believing that \neg P.
3. S believes that P, has reasons for believing that P, and has better reasons for believing that \neg P.
4. S believes that P, has reasons for believing that P, and has no reasons for believing that \neg P.
5. S believes that P, has reasons for believing that P, and has worse reasons for believing that \neg P.
6. S believes that P, has reasons for believing that P, and has equally good reasons for believing that \neg P.

Note that in these cases one might argue that on case 1 neither defeat condition is satisfied because both defeat conditions requires S to have reasons for P and $\neg P$ in the antecedent. However, the most charitable interpretation of the defeat conditions is that it they are concerned with the relative support for P and $\neg P$. This means that DC2 should be interpreted as requiring that the support for both P and $\neg P$ is equal in the antecedent, which includes the situation in which there is an equal lack of support for P and $\neg P$. If one instead were to interpret the defeat conditions as in actually requiring a person to have reasons for P and $\neg P$ before a defeat condition can be satisfied, DC1 is only satisfied if S does not only have a reason to believe that $\neg P$ but also a reason to believe that P. This means that if S has a reason to believe that $\neg P$ but no reason to believe that P (case 2), the justification for the belief that P would not be defeated. In other words, on PEC S would be justified to maintain the belief that P even if there is a (good) reason for believing that $\neg P$ and no reason to believe that P. This is both intuitively problematic and not in line with how epistemic conservatism is usually presented. Hence, I take it that McCain intended to talk of relative support for P and $\neg P$, since on that interpretation the justification to maintain the belief that P would be defeated if S has a reason for believing that $\neg P$ but no reason to believe that P because the support for $\neg P$ is stronger than for P.

According to DC1, given the most charitable interpretation of PEC I present above, the justification for S's belief is only defeated in cases 2 and 3 because only then does S have better reasons for believing that $\neg P$ rather than P. DC2 only applies when the reasons for believing that P are equally good as the reasons for believing that $\neg P$, in light of the most charitable interpretation of PEC, this means that cases 1 and 6 need further scrutiny in light of DC2 and in cases 4 and 5 S's belief is justified. In cases 1 and 6 the belief that P only remains justified if P coheres better with S's other beliefs than $\neg P$ does. In other words, the continued justification of P depends on a relatively strong coherence relation with S's other beliefs.

The issue I am raising here perhaps becomes clearer if we look at what is required for a belief to remain justified in PEC: either S has better

reasons for believing that P rather than $\neg P$ (cases 3 and 4) or the belief that P has a stronger coherence relation with S's other beliefs compared to $\neg P$ (cases 1 and 6). This means that it is not the mere absence of reasons against the belief that P (reasons for believing that $\neg P$) that allows a belief to remain justified. In PEC, it turns out that mere belief is not enough for justification.

Nonetheless, can we not understand it as a version of conservatism, since it is mere belief that generates the prima facie justification? From the perspective of avoiding arbitrariness, this is insufficient. If we only consider the prima facie justification—i.e., justification before we consider defeaters—then in conservatism, all beliefs are necessarily justified. This means that the difference between justified and unjustified beliefs is not explained. So, PEC can only avoid arbitrariness if it incorporates both a principle of inferentialist and coherentist justification. This then raises the question what the added value of “mere belief” actually is in PEC. Recall that in chapter 1 I suggested that an important role for conservatism could be found in the justification of belief maintenance, where another principle could provide justification for belief acquisition. One reason to let conservatism provide justification for belief maintenance is because other principles are too demanding to provide justification for the maintenance of a whole range of everyday and common-sense beliefs. PEC seems to undo this benefit of conservatism by requiring better reasons for P than for $\neg P$ or stronger coherence relations with S's other beliefs. Hence, to the extent that one wants to consider PEC as a version of conservatism, the dependence on other principles of justification in PEC undermines the meta-justification for conservatism.

6.3.4 Criterion 4: avoiding the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*

*A plausible principle of justification avoids arbitrariness as a consequence of the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*. This means that the principle explains the difference between passing judgement and suspending judgement.*

This criterion was derived from Foley's counterexample of beliefs about an even or odd number of grains of sand on a beach. McCain's conservatism does not justify beliefs that should obviously not be justified. If a person believes that there is an odd number of grains of sand on the beach, the *prima facie* justification for this belief is defeated because DC2 is satisfied. The reasons for believing that there are an equal number of grains of sand on the beach are equally good as the reasons for believing its negation. Hence, DC2 asks whether the belief that there are an even number of grains of sand on the beach coheres equally with the rest of the person's beliefs as its negation does. In the case of Foley's example, it is obvious that it does, and hence the defeat condition is satisfied and, in PEC, the belief is not justified. It is also clear that if this person would have believed the negation of this belief—that there are an odd number of grains of sand on the beach—the justification for the belief would have also been defeated.

Moreover, McCain mentions that in case the belief that P and the proposition that $\neg P$ cohere equally well, a person should withhold the belief that P and that $\neg P$ —a situation in which judgment about the justification of P and $\neg P$ is suspended. Therefore, this criterion is satisfied.

6.3.5 Criterion 5: avoiding uninterestingness

A plausible principle of justification produces epistemically interesting results. This means that it produces justification of such nature and degree that it contributes sufficiently to attaining an epistemic goal.

McCain has not stated explicitly which epistemic goal can be best achieved through PEC. Possibly this is due to compatibility of PEC with a variety of epistemic goals. However, to satisfy this criterion it only needs to be shown that PEC contributes sufficiently to attaining a given epistemic goal.

In the discussion of this criterion, I mentioned that the truth goal is traditionally the primary epistemic goal, meaning that the goal is to increase the number of true beliefs and reduce the number of false beliefs

in a person's overall set of beliefs. McCain does not give an indication as to why the mere fact that a person holds a belief contributes to this goal. However, we can assume that it is the same as for other versions of conservatism. That is, assuming that from all the beliefs one has there is a sufficient number of true beliefs, the defeat condition can rid one of a significant number of false beliefs without sacrificing too many true beliefs.

DC1 can help to achieve the truth goal by removing false beliefs if there are better reasons for the negation of those beliefs. This seems a plausible way of removing false beliefs; after all, various other theories of justification assume a positive correlation between the truth of a belief and having reasons for that belief. However, since McCain only requires a reason for believing that $\neg P$ to be better than the reasons for believing that P , the reasons for believing that $\neg P$ could still be very poor, just slightly less poor than the reasons for believing that P . This means that the justification for many beliefs is defeated by having a bad reason for $\neg P$ that is slightly better than the reasons for P . It seems rather surprising that a bad reason can serve as a defeater. One would assume that bad reasons against a belief do not correlate well with that belief being false—i.e., it might just as easily be true. This would make PEC rather uninteresting from the truth goal perspective. One might adapt this defeat condition by requiring that the reasons for believing that $\neg P$ are also good reasons in addition to being better reasons than the reasons for believing that P . In that case it is more likely that a defeated belief is also a false belief, meaning that PEC attains at least part of the truth goal.

DC2 will help to achieve the truth goal if cohering more with a person's other beliefs correlates with a belief being true and cohering equally well or less with a belief being false (since, in that case, justification is defeated). This seems plausible if the other beliefs with which the target belief coheres are themselves true or likely to be true. So, the contribution to the truth goal is conditional on another contribution to the truth goal. An adapted version of DC1 might prove sufficient for this. In that case, the two defeat conditions together contribute significantly to the truth goal.

I think that with a little adaption the same could be said for other possible epistemic goals. I also think that DC1 needs to be adapted as proposed. At first glance my proposed change of DC1 does not seem to be fundamental, however, it will likely increase the number of beliefs that are justified according to PEC since it takes more to defeat a prima facie justified belief. This might lead to over-permissiveness, in turn making PEC implausible. However, I think it is quite reasonable to expect that there will be a sufficient number of beliefs for which there are good reasons not to believe them and hence will not justify the unjustifiable. Hence, it is possible for a slightly adapted version of PEC to satisfy this criterion.

6.3.6 Criterion 6: avoiding backward reasoning

A plausible principle of justification does not use the fact that a person already holds a belief as a reason to form that belief.

McCain (2008, 198) explicitly mentions that the justification that derives from PEC is about retaining rather than forming a belief. It is clear from PEC that the fact that a person holds a belief is not the reason why that person should form that belief. PEC simply takes the fact that a person already has a belief as a starting point for judging whether a person should continue to hold that belief. Note that with regard to DC1, McCain says that there are many cases in which a person that has better reasons for believing that $\neg P$ rather than P should also believe that $\neg P$. Hence, with PEC McCain does offer belief-forming advice. However, it is clear that the fact that a person holds the belief that P does not form part of this advice. Hence, this criterion is satisfied.

6.3.7 Criterion 7: avoiding overly liberal defeaters

A plausible principle of justification avoids overly liberal defeaters. This means that a version of conservatism that relies on a defeat condition that is satisfied for every belief a person has, is implausible.

Although the defeat conditions in PEC are such that in order to avoid them S needs either better reasons in favour of P or S's belief that P needs to cohere better with S's other beliefs than they cohere with $\neg P$, it does not seem impossible to have a significant number of justified beliefs. McCain provided a number of examples of justified beliefs according to PEC and the defeat conditions do not appear so demanding that we could not imagine a belief being justified. However, avoiding the defeat of justification is much more demanding in PEC than in other versions of conservatism and it is clear that "mere belief" can never be justified without additional positive justifiers. Hence, if we would apply this criterion to the notion of "mere belief", then PEC would not satisfy this criterion. This means that as a principle of justification, PEC can satisfy this criterion, but if we understand conservatism as meaning that at least some "mere beliefs" can be justified, then, as a conservative principle of justification, this criterion is not satisfied.

6.3.8 Criterion 8: avoiding evidential ignorance

In a plausible principle of justification, evidence related to a belief is not ignored—evidence has a function in the principle.

Reasons play an essential role in McCain's conservatism. The prima facie justification of a belief can be defeated if there are better reasons for the negation of that belief. McCain (2008) even says that "in many cases, reasons for believing that $\neg P$ are strong enough that S should [...] believe that $\neg P$ " (186). However, the way such reasons are used leads to rather counterintuitive results. Imagine that S has terrible reasons for the belief that P and that her reasons for $\neg P$ are even worse. Then, according to PEC, S is justified in retaining the belief that P. Now imagine that she has superb reasons believing that P and very good reasons for believing that $\neg P$ that are almost but not quite as good as the reason for believing that P. S is then equally justified in retaining the belief that P as in the first scenario. The same reasoning applies to the defeat conditions. If S has terrible reason for believing that P and bad reasons for believing that $\neg P$

but just slightly better than the reasons for believing that P , then the justification for retaining the belief that P is defeated for S . Similarly, if S has excellent reasons for believing that P and excellent reason for believing that $\neg P$ that are slightly better would make the justification for the belief that P equally defeated as in the previous scenario. Overall, PEC does not seem to be sensitive to the strength of reasons or evidence.

This is surprising, given the importance of reasons in the defeat conditions. Given the two defeat conditions, in order for a belief to remain justified, a belief needs to either have better reasons for believing it than its negation or, in case the reasons are equally good, it needs to cohere better with the rest of a person's set of beliefs. Although McCain mentions that we should not understand "cohering with the rest of a person's set of beliefs" as a reason for believing that P or that $\neg P$ in the first defeat condition, we can understand "cohering with the rest of a person's set of beliefs" as a subset of reasons which are necessary to hold in order for the justification for retaining the belief that P to not be defeated (McCain 2008, 186). Thus, broadly understood, reasons are a necessary condition for the justification in PEC, yet it is only the relative strength of these reasons that is taken into account. This reduces the effectiveness of such reasons in achieving a given epistemic goal—for example, that of truth.

As mentioned in the section on avoiding uninterestingness, perhaps this can be adapted by requiring that reasons for believing that P are also good reasons. This would mean that the justification for the belief that P is defeated in case there are: 1) good reasons for believing that P , but even better reasons for believing that $\neg P$; 2) bad reasons for believing that P , even though the reasons for believing that $\neg P$ are equal or worse; or 3) bad reasons for believing that P and better reasons for believing that $\neg P$. It is clear that reasons play a pivotal role in PEC and that therefore the criterion is satisfied.

6.4 Conclusion

All criteria can be satisfied by PEC if a minor change in the first defeat condition is accepted. Hence, PEC can be considered plausible. The problem is that PEC is not a version of conservatism. According to PEC,

the maintenance of a belief is not yet justified in the absence of reasons against that belief. Rather, it also requires reasons in favour of it that are better than the reasons in favour of its negation, or the belief needs to cohere better with a person's other beliefs than does its negation. Hence, arbitrariness is only avoided by accepting that mere belief is never enough for justification. It is not just a matter of PEC not satisfying some arbitrary expectation of what epistemic conservatism should be. Rather, it concerns the reasons why conservatism is desirable in the first place. Since PEC will require persons to find either reasons or better coherence with their other beliefs in order to remain justified, it will also introduce the issues associated with those requirements. For example, many of our beliefs that we intuitively consider to be justified to maintain without having a reason for them might not be justified under PEC, because in the absence of reasons we might not find that they cohere better with our other beliefs as well. The same goes for many memory beliefs or other beliefs for which we have lost evidence.

The promise of conservatism was that it could explain why there are cases in which mere belief is enough for justification, however, PEC cannot deliver on that promise. PEC approaches this promise in the sense that it is not as demanding as an inferentialist principle of justification because the positive reasons that are required do not have to be particularly strong reasons in themselves. Rather, they simply need to be better than the reason for believing the negation—something that is not usually found in inferentialists' principles. Moreover, in case of equal reasons for holding a belief or its negation, the burden is relatively low as well, since it is merely about coherence with a person's other beliefs. Therefore, it does seem as if the fact that a person holds a belief contributes to justification of the maintenance of that belief and in that sense, there is a conservative element in PEC. PEC should thus be considered a compromise between "pure conservatism", "pure inferentialism", and "pure coherentism". In case no plausible version of conservatism can be found, this might be the next best thing. This, however, does not alter the conclusion that PEC cannot be considered a version of conservatism.

Chapter 7

A Plausible Version of Epistemic Conservatism

When reflecting on epistemic defeaters, the question of doubt warrants deeper consideration. Even if we think we are certain of something, doubt can act to nullify this assumption. In both philosophical and non-philosophical (everyday) conversation, we often speak of doubting some truth claim. Indeed, we often maintain a given belief without question until we either feel doubt ourselves, or someone points out that we should doubt what we believe. Moreover, in legal contexts, the notion of so-called “reasonable doubt” is commonly cited.

In this chapter, I develop a version of conservatism that utilises what I call “reasonable propositional doubt” as an essential part of the defeat condition. In addition, I show how such a version of conservatism can be understood when we take degrees of belief—which can also be construed along somewhat externalist lines—into account. I will evaluate this version, arguing that it satisfies all the criteria that I have developed over the previous chapters. Finally, I address the relation between the justification of belief maintenance and belief formation, arguing that conservatism can be expanded towards a radically weak foundationalism.

7.1 Reasonable Doubt as a Defeater

Perhaps the most famous philosophical use of doubt is that employed by René Descartes in his 1641 First Meditation, entitled: “Of the Things That May Be Brought within the Sphere of the Doubtful” (Descartes 1997, 134–139). Whilst Descartes does not give a definition of doubt itself, he clearly thinks that as soon as one can find an argument to doubt a particular knowledge claim, one should discard it. Regarding matters about which he can form opinions, Descartes (1997) states: “if I am able to find in each one some reason to doubt, this will suffice to justify my rejecting the whole” (134). In the literature, the conditions for such epistemic doubt are not usually analysed in isolation from justified belief, nor is much thought given about the exact role it plays in the justificatory process.⁴⁴ In this thesis doubt plays a central role in the defeat condition. Here, I will focus on propositional doubt, understood in the following terms:

Propositional doubt

S doubts that P, if and only if (i) S does not believe that P; (ii) even if S has some confidence in P; and (iii) S has at least some confidence in $\neg P$.

This definition attempts to capture the tension, incompleteness, and/or reservation phenomenologically associated with doubt—a phenomenology C.S. Peirce (1958) describes as follows:

doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and

44 McCain (2008), albeit without further explanation, also talks about doubt in relation to his version of conservatism, stating: “In many cases, the reasons for believing that $\neg P$ are strong enough that S should not only doubt that P, but should believe that $\neg P$ ” (186). It appears that for McCain, doubting that P is a doxastic attitude on the same continuum as believing that $\neg P$ and that doubt is brought about by weak reasons for believing that $\neg P$. However, given his defeat conditions, a reason to doubt that P might not be enough to defeat justification, since it depends on how strong the reasons for P are. Therefore, McCain does not speak of doubt as being a part of the defeat conditions, but rather as a possible appropriate doxastic attitude that should be considered after justification has been defeated.

satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else. [...] Yet for all that, doubt essentially involves a struggle to escape it. [...] The irritation of doubt causes a struggle to attain a state of belief. (99)

Similarly, John Schellenberg (2005) observes:

Doubts or uncertainties are disruptive and typically troubling feelings caused by one's awareness of objections to a proposition one once confidently believed and the (consequent) sense that it may not after all be true—feelings that involve or result in a diminishment of one's confidence with respect to that proposition and threaten one's belief but do not necessarily result in a complete loss of belief. (95)

It seems that, precisely instead of believing the doubted proposition, doubt leaves open the attitude I should adopt.⁴⁵ Believing that P is generally understood as an attitude of taking a proposition to be the case or true (Schwitzgebel, 2021). This does not seem to be compatible with the phenomenology associated with doubt in which a person is not settled on the truth of the proposition. This thought seems to be supported by examples such as these: 'Emmanuel believes that Paris is the capital of France but also doubts that Paris is the capital of France' or 'I believe that I am in Gouda but I also doubt whether I am in Gouda'. Doubting and believing these propositions at the same time seems to be problematic. Perhaps if one considers belief to come into degrees, the two attitudes become more compatible. However, belief simpliciter does not seem compatible with doubt.^{46 47}

45 Bertrand Russell does not give an elaborate analysis of doubt but does say something that seems to support the idea that doubt leaves open what kind of propositional attitude one is to adopt. He says that "doubt suggests a vacillation, an alternate belief and disbelief [...]." (1983, 142)

46 In section 7.5 I discuss the relation between degrees of belief and doubt in more detail.

47 Note further that I was inspired to analyse propositional doubt by an unpublished paper on the topic by Rik Peels. For further discussion on the definition of doubt see also Blaauw and Pritchard (2005, 43), Moon (2018), Salman (1995).

Moreover, my definition of propositional doubt refers to both belief and confidence. 'Belief' is understood as belief simpliciter whereas 'confidence' is understood as a positive doxastic attitude towards a proposition that is not necessarily belief. I distinguish between these terms in order to capture the phenomenology of doubt in which it seems that doubting a proposition is not necessarily the same as believing the negation of that proposition. This leads me to conclude that doubt involves a positive doxastic attitude towards the proposition that is doubted. Hence, in this dissertation confidence in a proposition simply means a positive doxastic attitude towards a proposition that can be equated to a belief but can also be some positive doxastic attitude that is weaker than belief. In section 7.5 I discuss degrees of beliefs in relation to this version of conservatism. There, confidence is used in the same fashion but since belief is understood to come into degrees, confidence in a proposition will be equated to those degrees of belief.

There could be all manner of causes as to why one experiences doubt. For example, one might struggle with a lack of self-confidence, experience a particular receptiveness to social pressure, or simply have a particularly worrying-prone personality. I, however, want to employ doubt in an epistemically justificatory process, and therefore I will focus on propositional doubt that is supported by reasons—i.e., reasonable doubt. In the following definition of reasonable doubt, the notion "S doubts that P" refers to propositional doubt as defined above.

Reasonable doubt

S reasonably doubts that P, if and only if S doubts that P because S has access to a sufficient reason for $\neg P$.

If one were to develop a defeat condition on the basis of this notion of reasonable doubt, it might be understood as saying that S needs to in fact doubt that P in order for the prima facie justification for the maintenance of the belief that P to be defeated. However, as mentioned above believing that P and doubting that P at the same time seems incompatible. Given my definition of doubt, if S doubts that P, S does not believe that P. Hence,

in fact doubting that P and S in fact believing that P are contradictory. Moreover, people can have a reason on the basis of which they ought to doubt that P even if they do not in fact doubt that P. Hence, in this context, reasonable doubt should be understood as a normative concept. This leads to the following definition of reasonable doubt:

Reasonable doubt*

S ought to doubt that P, if and only if S can doubt that P because S has access to a sufficient reason for $\neg P$.

The term “reasonable doubt*” provides the definition of reasonable doubt employed throughout the remainder of this chapter. Note that a person does not in fact need to doubt that P in order for reasonable doubt to defeat the prima facie justification for the belief that P, since reasonable doubt is understood in a normative way. This makes the defeat condition independent of the psychological constitution of the subject, echoing the way in which the notion of reasonable doubt is used in other contexts, for example in legal arguments. In such instances, “reasonable doubt” does not seem to imply that a judge or juror in fact needs to have the attitude of doubt in order for reasonable doubt to be taken into consideration. Note also that this gives conservatism a slight externalist slant in the sense that the defeating attitude—doubt—is not necessarily internal to the subject.⁴⁸

In the above definitions of reasonable doubt, I require that S has access to a sufficient reason for $\neg P$. I understand ‘a sufficient reason for $\neg P$ ’ to be a reason on the basis of which one should have at least some confidence in $\neg P$, i.e., the reason increases the confidence in $\neg P$, and that is itself epistemically justified. Note that I do not commit to a specific theory or principle of epistemic justification regarding this reason for $\neg P$ but it should not come as a surprise that I think it is possible that such

48 Conservatism is typically understood as an internalist version of foundationalism (Hasan and Fumerton 2018). However, it does seem possible to formulate an externalist version of it if one accepts externalist defeaters.

a reason can be justified on the version of epistemic conservatism that I defend in this chapter.

Furthermore, the definitions of reasonable doubt speak of 'access'. As I have mentioned in section 1.5.4, a significant discussion in epistemology is between internalist and externalist accounts of justification. In internalist accounts, having access to a reason is usually understood as having some kind of reflective access to this reason or being aware of this reason and its access. One might also understand 'having access' in a more externalist fashion, for example simply having access to an online library in which one can find the appropriate literature that provides a reason for $\neg P$.⁴⁹ I think a conservative need not commit to a particular view here in order to defend the plausibility of epistemic conservatism. Hence, I will not develop the term and keep an open attitude towards different ways of understanding 'having access'. Note that when I refer to S's reason for $\neg P$ I do not take a position in the discussion on the extent of access or awareness to a reason and simply mean that S has a non-specified extent of access to this reason.

Reasonable doubt defeats the prima facie justification because if S ought to doubt that P, S ought not to maintain the belief that P and this is in direct contradiction with the requirement or permission for S to continue to believe that P which follows from the prima facie justification for the maintenance of the belief that P. Since the duty to doubt that P is based on a reason, whereas the duty or permission to continue to believe that P is not, S ought to doubt that P rather than continuing to believe that P. In other words, it is the support gained from reasons that makes doubting that P preferable over continuing to believe that P. This preference is an expression of the epistemic intuition that, *ceteris paribus*, having a reason for a propositional attitude is preferable over not having a reason.

This raises the question whether it is reasonable doubt that does the defeating, or whether it is the reason for an increased confidence in $\neg P$ itself. In my understanding of the mechanism of defeat, it has to be

49 See for example Pappas (2017) for an overview of this discussion.

reasonable doubt because, by definition, *S* ought not to believe that *P* if *S* ought to doubt that *P*, which contradicts the obligation or permission to continue to believe that *P*, whereas merely having a reason for higher confidence that $\neg P$ does not in itself lead to such a contradiction. Moreover, it is intuitive to say that a reason for an increased, albeit still low degree of confidence that $\neg P$ is sufficient to doubt that *P*, but it is not enough to say that one ought to believe that $\neg P$. In other words, if one ought not to believe that $\neg P$, why would the *prima facie* justification for maintaining the belief that *P* be defeated? The fact that one ought to doubt that *P* explains this.

Epistemic conservatism is also often presented as being modest in what can be expected in terms of justification. For example, in Chisholm's and Kvanvig's versions of conservatism, a belief could only have "a presumption in its favour" rather than "being justified". My version also expresses this modesty in the sense that the burden for defeat is relatively low: *S* does not need access to a reason in favour of $\neg P$ such that *S* ought to believe that $\neg P$, but only to a reason in favour of $\neg P$ such that *S* has an increased confidence in $\neg P$ on the basis of which *S* ought to doubt that *P*. In this sense, the level of justification that is attained in epistemic conservatism should be considered "frail" or "strongly liable".

7.2 What Are Reasons for Doubt?

It is not hard to think of things we ordinarily take as good reasons for doubt. For example, if we believe we are home alone but hear a creaky floorboard, we might doubt our solitude. Philosophy, however, complicates things. Global scepticism—the idea that we cannot know anything or cannot have any justified beliefs at all—can be understood as claiming that we should doubt every belief a person has. For example, Descartes's (1997, 138–139) so-called "evil demon" argument states that we cannot exclude the possibility that all memories, experiences, and beliefs are induced by a deceiving powerful evil demon, rendering what is true and what is false indistinguishable for us. Since knowledge of *P* seems to be closed under known implication, such that if *S* knows that *P*, and knows that *P* entails *Q*, then *S* is thereby in a position to know that *Q*

(the so-called closure principle), the evil demon argument seems to be a reason for doubting that P , where P can be any belief one may have.⁵⁰ Does this present a challenge to my version of epistemic conservatism?

If one expects epistemic conservatism to end the discussion on scepticism by revealing its impossibility, then it is. However, given this expectation, many other, if not all, principles of justification would fail to deliver justified beliefs and hence become implausible. In this thesis I assume that the challenge of scepticism is not particularly relevant to my aim, namely to study the plausibility of epistemic conservatism as a principle of justification, as opposed to studying the plausibility of epistemic justification altogether.

Nonetheless, reflecting on sceptical arguments does highlight something about the way in which I want to employ doubt, namely, that it is particular rather than universal. Universal propositional doubt is aimed at all beliefs or perhaps even all imaginable propositions, whereas particular propositional doubt is not. A concrete reason for doubt only targets particular propositions, without implicating any other of the same type. So, for example, if you ought to doubt “I have hands” because the surgeon says “Sorry, we had to amputate them”, that does not generalise to “I have a body” or “here is a table”, unlike the evil demon hypothesis, which does generalise. This means that a reason to doubt that P needs to increase the confidence in $\neg P$ in particular.

Another relevant insight is given by the discussion on undercutting and rebutting defeaters.⁵¹ The rebutting defeater is directed at the target belief itself. For example, if Hylke believes that there is no-one in the room, then simply opening the door to the room and seeing Sytse in the room is a rebutting defeater for Hylke’s belief that there is no-one in the

50 Note that I assume here that if one has a reason to doubt that P that challenges one’s claim to knowing that P , it also challenges one’s justification for believing that P . However, the relation between a knowledge claim and justified belief cannot be equivocated quite so easily. For an overview of the discussion on this, see Ichikawa and Steup (2018). For the purposes of this dissertation, I can ignore this discussion and carry on with my assumption without consequence.

51 For an overview of this discussion, see for example Koons (2022).

room.⁵² An undercutting defeater is directed at the basis of the target belief. For example, if someone believes that there is no-one in the room because someone who just came out of the room said the room was empty, then finding out that this person has been lying is an undercutting defeater for believing that no-one is in the room (Pollock 1986, 38–39).

In some sense, my version of epistemic conservatism only employs rebutting defeaters because it is reasonable doubt that does the defeating—the fact that one should doubt that *P* makes holding on to *P* unjustified. However, one might distinguish between rebutting and undercutting reasons for doubt. A rebutting reason is quite straightforward: a reason that increases the confidence of $\neg P$ such that *S* cannot commit to the belief that *P* is a reason to doubt that *P*. However, an undercutting reason is more complicated since, in conservatism, the *prima facie* justification for a belief is not founded on propositions or experiences, but on the fact that it is a belief.

So, what is there to undercut? One might argue that justified belief formation is a necessary condition for justified belief maintenance and hence if belief formation is not justified, the justification for belief maintenance cannot obtain either. Therefore, the fact that a belief was not justifiably formed—or the awareness of this fact—can be understood as an undercutting reason in conservatism. For example, if one thinks that a belief is justifiably formed if, and only if, the belief formation is based on evidence, then (being aware of) the absence of such evidence is an undercutting reason.

However, this reasoning conflicts with a core assumption of conservatism. Conservatism does not claim that the fact that a belief was justifiably formed is the reason for the *prima facie* justification for continuing to hold on to the belief. Rather, it presumes that it is justifiably formed because a person in fact holds the belief that *P*. In conservatism, the mere awareness of the absence of a justifier, such as evidence, to form

52 Recall that in Chisholm's version of conservatism a belief that *P* was defeated if it was explicitly contradicted by another belief a person has and that this could come in the form of $Q \rightarrow \neg P$. In that case *Q* is a rebutting defeater for *P*.

a belief is not itself a reason to doubt that P. Instead, the undercutting reason must be such that it positively shows that a belief was not justifiably formed. For example, if S has a reason that shows that one was hallucinating when forming a particular belief that P, then S has a reason to doubt that P and S should stop believing that P. Hence, undercutting reasons in conservatism have to show that the belief in question was in fact formed in a way that does not support its truth, such as being formed by a mechanism or procedure that one has reason to think is unreliable.⁵³

Finally, it is important to note that a reason to doubt that P should be a good reason in the sense that the confidence in $\neg P$ should be increased because of the reason and that the reason itself is not defeated. This does not mean that it has to be a reason such that S is justified in believing that $\neg P$ (although this would be a reason to doubt that P). Moreover, from the perspective of conservatism there is no particular restriction on whether a reason can only be a proposition or also an experience, whether it is itself inferred or not, and whether a person should have direct access to the reason or not.

7.3 Doubt, Disbelief, and the Suspension of Judgment

In addition to believing that P or $\neg P$, it is possible to suspend judgment about P and $\neg P$ —i.e., S neither believes that P nor $\neg P$ (or neither believes, nor disbelieves that P). The conclusion of many sceptical arguments is that we should adopt this doxastic attitude towards every proposition.⁵⁴ However, we also saw that this seems to be the right attitude to take in many non-sceptical scenarios, such as in the case of a coin-toss. So, how might this attitude relate to doubt?

53 At the end of this chapter, I will argue that conservatism might not even need to presume justified belief formation, but only that, at the very least, some of the formed beliefs are true. This means that only a reason from which it follows that all or nearly all a person's beliefs are false will be an undercutting reason to doubt a belief that P.

54 In fact, ancient sceptics even referred to themselves as “those who suspend” (*ephektikoi*; Vogt 2021). For an overview of sceptical arguments, see also Comesaña and Klein (2019).

A key characteristic of suspension of judgment seems to be the balance in confidence between P and $\neg P$.⁵⁵ In the coin-toss there is a perfect balance between one's confidence in its landing tails as its landing heads, and it seems that one should suspend judgment regarding which way the coin will land exactly because of this balance: there should not be something that favours one side over the other. Although one can be in doubt whether P or $\neg P$ and this could be because of a perfect balance in confidence in P or $\neg P$, one can also have doubt about P , but still have higher confidence in P than in $\neg P$, or one can strongly doubt that P such that one's confidence in $\neg P$ is higher than in P .⁵⁶

Hence, suspending judgment about P or $\neg P$ seems to be reasonable if the reason to doubt that P is such that the confidence in P and $\neg P$ is balanced. In the architecture of my version of conservatism this would mean that suspension of judgment regarding P and $\neg P$ is an attitude one might take as a response to the defeat of the prima facie justification for the belief that P .

This also means that if the confidence in P and $\neg P$ is not balanced, it is more reasonable to adopt other doxastic attitudes. A high confidence in $\neg P$ might be sufficient to believe that $\neg P$. Moreover, if one ought to doubt that P , but the confidence in P and $\neg P$ is not balanced and the confidence in $\neg P$ is not sufficient consider it a belief that $\neg P$, it is not reasonable to believe that P , nor believe that $\neg P$, nor suspend judgment regarding P or

55 Alternative views on the nature of suspension of judgment are, for example, that it is an agnostic (*sui generis*) attitude (Friedman 2013), that it is question-directed and a necessary condition for inquiry (Friedman 2017), or that it involves the higher-order belief that one cannot yet tell whether or not P (Raleigh 2021).

56 I was inspired by Daniel Howard-Snyder's (2013) distinction between having doubts whether P , being in doubt whether P , and doubting that P , although I have not taken over his distinction exactly. His distinction is as follows: "For one to have doubts about whether P —note the "s"—is for one to have what appear to one to be grounds to believe not- p and, as a result, for one to be at least somewhat inclined to disbelieve P . For one to be in doubt about whether P is for one neither to believe nor disbelieve P as a result of one's grounds for P seeming to be roughly on a par with one's grounds for not- P . One can have doubts without being in doubt, and one can be in doubt without having doubts. Having doubts and being in doubt are not to be identified with doubting that. If one doubts that something is so, one is at least strongly inclined to disbelieve it; having doubts and being in doubt lack that implication" (Howard-Snyder 2013, 359).

$\neg P$. Hence, a *sui generis* doxastic attitude is reasonable, for which I think being in doubt about P is the best candidate, which I define as follows:

Being in doubt about P

S is in doubt about P , if and only if (i) S does not believe that P ; (ii) S has some confidence in P ; (iii) S does not believe that $\neg P$; (iv) S has some confidence in $\neg P$; and (v) S 's confidence in P and $\neg P$ is not balanced.

Note that the architecture is thus such that reasonable doubt can defeat the *prima facie* justification for maintaining the belief that P and given that it is defeated, there are three possible doxastic attitudes to take: disbelief, suspension of judgment, and being in doubt. It depends on the reason favouring $\neg P$ which response is reasonable or appropriate.

7.4 The No-doubt Account of Epistemic Conservatism

In my version of conservatism, the existence of reasonable doubt that P is the defeater for *prima facie* justification. This means that in the absence of such reasonable doubt, S is justified in maintaining the belief that P .⁵⁷ This no-doubt account of conservatism (NDAC) can be formulated as follows:

57 Note the difference between “not doubting that P ” and “ P being indubitable”. The latter makes it impossible to doubt that P at all, whereas the former is the mere conclusion that there is in fact no doubt about P .

NDAC: *If S believes that P, then S is justified in continuing to believe that P, unless S ought to doubt that P.*⁵⁸

Defeat response 1: if S's reason to doubt that P is such that the confidence in $\neg P$ is sufficiently high to consider it a belief that $\neg P$, then S should believe that $\neg P$.

Defeat response 2: if S's reason to doubt that P is such that S's confidence in P is the same as S's confidence in $\neg P$, then S should suspend judgment regarding P and $\neg P$.

Defeat response 3: if S's reason to doubt that P is such that S's confidence in P is not the same as S's confidence in $\neg P$, nor sufficiently high to consider it a belief that $\neg P$, then S should be in doubt about P.

7.5 Degrees of Belief

Belief can be understood either in terms of degree, or as being “belief simpliciter” (also called binary belief: a person either believes a proposition or he does not). In the discussion on epistemic conservatism, belief is usually understood as the latter. This makes sense, since it helps keep philosophising about justification comprehensible. Moreover, in our daily utterances of doxastic attitudes, we often employ an approach that appears to follow the former degrees of belief. Phrases such as “I think that”, “I am convinced that”, or “I suspect that” seem to express doxastic

58 One might wonder whether this is a diachronic or a synchronic principle. In a diachronic version the problem might be the fact that S believes that P and the absence of reason to doubt that P might be satisfied at different moments in time such that S believes that P at time t1, there is no doubt that P at time t2 and therefore S is justified in believing that P at time t2 ($B(P)t1 \rightarrow (\neg RD(P)t2 \rightarrow JB(P)t2)$). However, this implies that S can be justified in believing that P at t2 without in fact believing that P at t2 and hence in NDAC, S has gained justification for belief formation for P at t2. Therefore, NDAC needs to be understood as saying that S should also in fact believe that P at t2 ($B(P)t1 \rightarrow (B(P)t2 \wedge \neg RD(P)t2 \rightarrow JB(P)t2)$). This means that at t2 S believes that P and there are no reasons to doubt that P and therefore S is justified in believing that P at t2. In a synchronic version of the idea this would be expressed as S believes that P and there is no reason to doubt that P, therefore S is justified in believing that P ($(B(P) \wedge \neg RD(P)) \rightarrow JB(P)$).

attitudes towards a proposition that should not be used synonymously and instead indicate different degrees of the same doxastic attitude.

In formal epistemology, degrees of belief are usually understood in a numerical sense.⁵⁹ However, understanding degrees of belief in non-numerical terms is equally possible and perhaps even preferable in light of the risk of false precision.⁶⁰ Using degrees of belief might correspond better with natural utterances of doxastic attitudes and, as can be seen below, allows for a more nuanced response to a defeater in conservatism. Note, however, that I do not think that a commitment to degrees of belief is necessary for a plausible version of conservatism. In this chapter I will present a version of conservatism that uses both a binary concept of belief, and a version that uses a graded concept of belief. The following set of terms suggests how one might indicate degrees of belief, where absolute certainty that *P* is the highest degree and suspecting that *P* is the lowest degree:

Being certain that P
Being convinced that P
Strongly believe that P
Believe that P
Think that P
Suspects that P

59 Formal epistemology uses the tools of logic and math to answer epistemological questions. Degrees of belief are often formalised on a scale between 0 and 1, where 0 indicates certainty of falsehood of the proposition and 1 certainty of its truth, and 0.5, for example, that the proposition is considered equally likely to be true as false (Switzgebel 2021).

60 Although degrees of belief are intuitive, there is no agreement on what it actually means or whether they are even possible. Lina Eriksson and Alan Hájek (2007) argue that “degrees of belief” is conceptually primitive, meaning that it is not reducible to other concepts that are used in epistemology, such as “belief” or “preference”, in order for it to be successfully used. They compare “degrees of belief” with the concept of “knowledge” in knowledge-first epistemology as an unanalysable term (Eriksson en Hájek 2007, 204–211). René van Woudenberg and Rik Peels (2016, 59–62) argue that whether beliefs adhere to degrees depends on one’s theory of belief and that not all theories of belief adhere to degrees. For the purposes of this dissertation, one need not be committed to positions on a particular conceptualisation of degrees of belief, nor to a particular theory of belief.

Prima facie justification for maintaining belief simpliciter in conservatism is straightforward. The fact that a person holds a belief is sufficient for prima facie justification to continue to hold on to that belief. In the case of a graded concept of belief it is, from a conservative perspective, intuitive to say that the fact that a person holds a belief to degree *D* is sufficient for prima facie justification to continue to hold on to that belief to that degree. For example, if *S* “is certain” that she has locked the door, it seems that she is prima facie justified to continue to “be certain” that she has locked the door, rather than only continue to “think” that she has locked the door.

Another intuitive idea is that when the justifier changes in intensity or degree—for example if one finds another piece of evidence in favour of *P* in addition to the evidence favouring *P* one already has—the degree of belief should correspond with this change. The same logic could apply to a defeater: if the intensity or degree of a defeater changes, the degree of belief should correspond with this change. Perhaps it is appropriate to speak of a partial defeater to clarify that the defeater does not apply to the justification for all degrees of beliefs. One might say that such a partial defeater subtracts some justification from the prima facie justified degree of belief such that a lower degree of belief remains for which justification remains as well.

Admittedly, this is a controversial position because it carries with it the implication that the prima facie justification for a high degree of belief that *P* also encapsulates the prima facie justification for a lower degree of belief that *P*. In other words, if *S* is prima facie justified in being certain that *P*, then *S* is potentially justified in suspecting that *P* as well. This notion is controversial since it is intuitive to say that a lower degree of justification is unjustified even if the higher degree of justification is justified—i.e., a high degree of justification does not automatically translate into a lower degree of justification. However, it also seems intuitive to say that if there is a justifier that leads to a high degree of justification and part of the justifier is lost—if, for example, part of the evidence turns out to be wrong—then there remains a lower degree of justification.

Hence, I take it that it is possible that a part of one's original justification remains even if one loses another part of one's justification.

Nonetheless, it is also intuitive to think that a minor or weak reason to doubt that *P* should have a different effect on different degrees of belief. If one is certain that *P* and one has a minor or weak reason to doubt that *P*, it seems intuitive to say that although one should not continue to be certain that *P*, one might still suspect that *P*. My line of reasoning above takes this intuition seriously. If one accepts this, a graded version of NDAC is possible in which a partial defeater can "downgrade" the degree of belief that one is justified to hold on to. Given my understanding of reasonable doubt, it is intuitive to say that reasonable doubt is a full defeater if there is reasonable doubt on the basis of a reason that supports a positive doxastic attitude that $\neg P$ which is stronger than the degree of belief that *P* that *S* in fact has.

It is also intuitive to speak of a partial defeater if there is reasonable doubt on the basis of a reason that supports a positive doxastic attitude that $\neg P$ which is weaker than the degree of belief that *P* that *S* in fact has. Moreover, if reasonable doubt is based on a reason that supports a positive doxastic attitude that $\neg P$ is equally strong as the degree of belief that *P* that *S* in fact has, then I argue it makes sense to speak of a full defeater. This latter point again reflects the frailty of justification in epistemic conservatism and expresses the underlying intuition that the existence of reasonable doubt tips the scale towards the defeat of justification. Reasonable doubt will always defeat the justification for the maintenance of a degree of belief a person has and, in a case in which there is a partial defeater, will allow the belief to be justified to maintain a lower degree than the person in fact has. This graded no-doubt account of conservatism (graded NDAC) can be formulated as follows:

Graded NDAC: *if S believes that P to degree D, then S is justified in continuing to believe that P to degree D, unless S ought to doubt that P.*⁶¹

61 The comments on NDAC regarding a synchronic and diachronic version of this principle apply equally to graded NDAC.

Graded NDAC defeat response 1: if S's reason to doubt that P is such that the degree of confidence in $\neg P$ is higher than S's confidence in P, such that it is sufficient to consider it a belief that $\neg P$ to degree D, then S should stop holding on to the belief that P to any degree and believe that $\neg P$ to degree D.

Graded NDAC defeat response 2: if S's reason to doubt that P is such that the degree of confidence in $\neg P$ is higher than S's confidence in P, such that it is sufficient to consider it a belief that $\neg P$ to degree D, then S should stop holding on to the belief that P to any degree and believe that $\neg P$ to degree D.

Graded NDAC defeat response 3: if S's reason to doubt that P is such that the degree of confidence in $\neg P$ is lower than S's confidence in P, then S should stop holding on to the belief that P to degree D, but is allowed to hold on to the belief that P to a lower degree than D.⁶²

Graded NDAC defeat response 4: if S's reason to doubt that P is such that the degree of confidence in $\neg P$ is the same as S's confidence in P, then S should suspend judgment regarding P and $\neg P$.

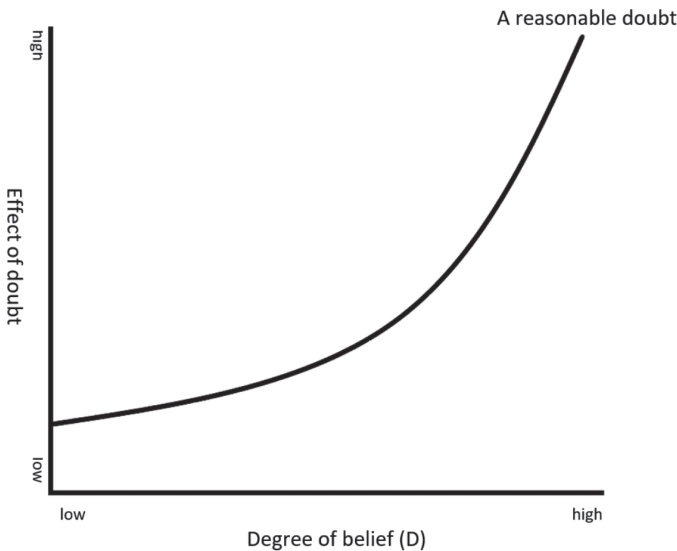
If, in conservatism, one opts for degrees of belief, a problem might arise in relation to reasons for doubt: it seems as if the same reason can lead to different outcomes. If S1 is certain that P whereas S2 only suspects that P and they encounter the same reason to doubt that P such that they should stop holding on to their degree of belief that P, but can continue to hold on to the belief that P to a lower degree, then S1 might, for example, continue to be convinced that P, whereas S2 already held the belief that P to a low degree and now needs to stop holding on to the belief that P to any degree. This would mean that someone who tends to have a higher degree of belief will be allowed to hold on to more beliefs to a certain degree than

62 The extent to which the degree of belief should be downgraded depends on the relative strength of the reasonable doubt.

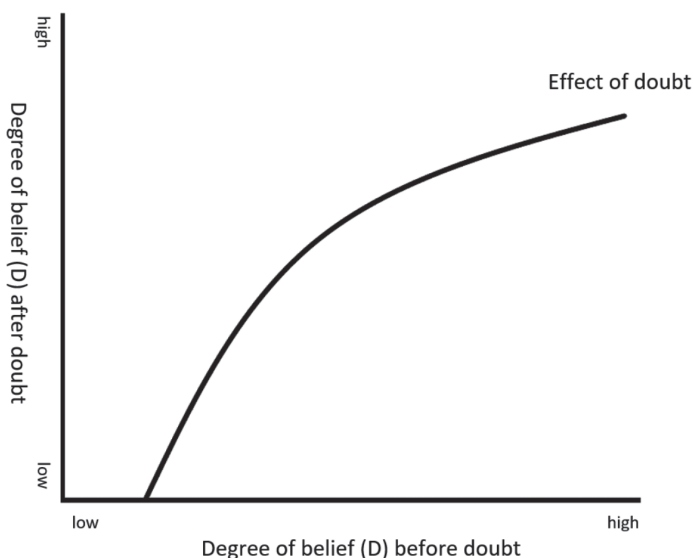
someone who tends to have lower degrees of belief. One might say there is a gullibility bias. How then should a conservative respond?

First, this might simply be the consequence of the differences in the belief formation that has led to different outcomes. Hence, the justification of belief maintenance is simply reproducing the input of justification of belief formation with an update based on reasonable doubt. The difference in outcome is unproblematic in this line of reasoning.

However, another response is possible. A conservative might say that there is a law of increasing effect of doubt: the higher a degree of belief, the greater the effect doubt will have on it. This seems intuitive: if one is “certain that P”, but then encounters a reason to doubt that P, then the expectations that a high degree of belief create, stand in stark contrast with the reasonable doubt that one encounters, whereas if one “thinks that P” and encounters the same reasonable doubt, the contrast with one’s expectations is less stark. One might visualise this as follows:



Moreover, this would give the following relation between the degree of belief one is justified to hold before and after one encounters reasonable doubt:



Before evaluating this version of conservatism, some examples of how it works in practice might be useful. Take for example my belief that “I have hands”. I am absolutely certain that I have hands, so I have the highest degree of belief. Although I can imagine the logical possibility that I in fact do not have hands and that I am merely a handless brain-in-a-vat, this would not be a reason for doubt. If instead I would have a hallucinatory experience and perhaps a vague recollection that I do not have hands, I would have reason to doubt my being certain that I have hands and my certainty would be defeated (although it is intuitive to say that I could continue to hold on to the belief that I have hands to a lower degree). If such an experience and recollection are not present, I am justified to continue to be certain that I have hands. Another example is that S strongly believes that “the moon is made of cheese”. There are many reasons for believing that the moon is not made of cheese—such as enlarged pictures of the moon, moon rocks in museums, video footage of the moon, witness reports, and information on the differing chemistries of lunar objects and dairy products. These are all excellent reasons that support a doxastic attitude that the moon is not made of cheese that is stronger than S’s belief that the moon is made of cheese. Hence, there is

a full defeater for the belief that the moon is made of cheese and S should stop believing so altogether.

7.6 The No-doubt Account of Epistemic Conservatism Evaluated

In this section, I evaluate my version of conservatism using the criteria formulated in previous chapters. I will only distinguish between simple and graded variations when necessary. Otherwise, it can be assumed that the analysis I present applies to both variations. On the basis of this evaluation, I will conclude that the no-doubt account of conservatism is plausible.

7.6.1 Criterion 1: avoiding infinite regression

A plausible principle of justification does not require a person S to believe an infinite number of propositions in order for a belief that P to be justified for S.

In NDAC, prima facie justification of the maintenance of the belief that P does not require a person to hold any additional beliefs that support the belief that P inferentially, let alone an infinite number of beliefs. However, does the defeat condition lead to an infinite regress? One might argue that the reason to doubt that P is only a good reason if it is itself inferentially supported by another good reason, which itself is only a good reason if it is inferentially supported by another good reason. Assuming that one avoids circularity, this would be the start of an infinite regress. However, the way in which I use the notion of reason does not preclude that the reason is itself based on an experience or something else that stops an infinite regress from occurring. Moreover, if a particular reason for doubt can only be reasonably held if it is supported by an infinite number of beliefs, that reason is itself defeated due to the impossibility of the reason being reasonable itself. Hence, such a reason would not lead to doubt in the first place. Therefore, this criterion is satisfied.

7.6.2 Criterion 2: avoiding circularity

A plausible principle of justification avoids circularity such that the belief that P is not justified by a chain of reasons that is grounded in the belief that P itself.

NDAC and graded NDAC do not seem circular. This can be shown if we formulate an argument for the justification of the belief that P. Note that S does not need to show such an argument in order for the belief that P to be justified for S. Hence, showing this argument is merely a tool for evaluation in this dissertation.

NDAC

1. If S believes that P, then S is justified in continuing to believe that P, unless S ought to doubt that P;
2. S ought to doubt that P if, and only if, S has access to a sufficient reason for $\neg P$;
3. S believes that P;
4. S does not have access to a reason for $\neg P$;
5. [From 2 & 4] S ought not to doubt that P;

6. Therefore, S is justified in continuing to believe that P.

Graded NDAC

1. If S believes that P to degree D, then S is justified in continuing to believe that P to degree D, unless S ought to doubt that P;
2. S ought to doubt that P, if and only if S has access to a sufficient reason for $\neg P$;
3. S believes that P to degree D;
4. S does not have access to a reason for $\neg P$;
5. [From 2 & 4] S ought not to doubt that P;

6. Therefore, S is justified in continuing to believe that P to degree D.

As can be seen, there are no premisses that are also a part of the conclusion. However, there might be a hidden premise that would make the

argument circular. In graded NDAC, premise 4 might be especially liable since it could be argued that if there are reasons that increase the confidence in $\neg P$, then S has already taken this into account when forming the belief—i.e., S has a lower degree of belief that P due to this reason, and hence premise 4 will always be the case, meaning that the argument boils down to saying that S believes that P to degree D and therefore S is justified in maintaining the belief that P to degree D, which looks circular.

However, this objection can be easily parried by pointing out that if people were so sensitive to reasons that they would automatically adapt their beliefs to those available to them, then the fact that a person holds that belief would mean that it was based on all the reasons available to that person and hence the mere fact that a person believes that P, without considering any defeat conditions, would be sufficient for justification. Obviously, this is implausible and in any case would be an argument for an even stronger version of conservatism. Hence, this does not pose a threat to graded NDAC.

For NDAC, such circularity would not occur because the reasons for believing that $\neg P$ would not influence the degree of belief, but rather the process of forming the belief that P in the first place. If S is sensitive to reasons for believing that $\neg P$ and these reasons are such that he would not form the belief that P, then on NDAC there is no prima facie justification to begin with and hence there cannot be circularity in the justification of the maintenance of the belief that P. If a person forms a belief in spite of the reason for believing that $\neg P$, then these are reasons to doubt that P (assuming that they are not good reasons), which would defeat the prima facie justification for the maintenance of the belief that P. So, for NDAC, premise 4 would not always be the case and there would not be a circular argument in the first place. Therefore, this criterion is satisfied.

7.6.3 Criterion 3: avoiding arbitrariness

A plausible principle of justification is able to explain the difference between a justified and an unjustified belief.

The distinction between justified and unjustified beliefs in NDAC, as in most versions of conservatism, resides in the defeat condition. It is the presence or absence of reasons for doubt that makes the difference between a justified and an unjustified belief. In the graded version of NDAC, one might argue that there is an arbitrariness in the degree of belief that is held after defeat: why would some people be justified in holding on to a belief to a high degree whereas others are not? The possible responses there are for a conservative, including the possibility of an increasing effect of doubt given a higher degree of belief, have already been argued for (above). Hence, this is not of genuine concern for NDAC and arbitrariness is avoided.

In addition, the same question I asked for McCain's conservatism can be asked here: is the difference between justified and unjustified beliefs not actually explained by something hidden? It may help here to examine again the situations considered in our evaluation of McCain's conservatism:

1. S believes that P, has no reasons for believing that P, and has no reasons for believing that $\neg P$ either.
2. S believes that P, has no reasons for believing that P, and has reasons for believing that $\neg P$.
3. S believes that P, has reasons for believing that P, and has better reasons for believing that $\neg P$.
4. S believes that P, has reasons for believing that P, and has no reasons for believing that $\neg P$.
5. S believes that P, has reasons for believing that P, and has worse reasons for believing that $\neg P$.
6. S believes that P, has reasons for believing that P, and has equally good reasons for believing that $\neg P$.

In NDAC, the belief that P is justified in cases 1 and 4. In all other cases, there are reasons to doubt that P. Thus, in all these cases justification would be defeated. Hence, justification can truly be said to stem from mere belief in the absence of reasons for doubt. However, this raises a

new question in case 3, since one might think that the belief that P might be justified because the reasons for believing that P are better than the reasons for believing that \neg P. It seems as if NDAC can only account for reasons in favour of \neg P and not those in favour of P. Is this not also a form of arbitrariness? It appears that NDAC cannot really explain the difference between beliefs for which there is reasonable doubt yet that are justified because they have good reasons in favour of them, and beliefs for which there is reasonable doubt yet are unjustified because they do not have good reasons in favour of them.

The conservative can respond to this by pointing out that, in conservatism, having a belief without a defeater is a sufficient albeit not necessary condition for justification. In other words, it does not exclude the possibility of a belief being justified on the basis of another condition, such as having sufficient evidence to believe that P. This also means that on conservatism, if justification is defeated, it is possible that on another principle of justification, this belief can be justified. In a full-blown theory of justification, several principles of justification can work to complement each other.

In any case, it would not be appropriate to consider this to be arbitrary, since it is not the case that there was no explanation for the difference between justified and unjustified beliefs. Rather, in this explanation justification was not sensitive enough to evidence, which is the topic of criterion 8. Hence, I think arbitrariness is avoided and this criterion is satisfied.

7.6.4 Criterion 4: avoiding the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*

*A plausible principle of justification avoids arbitrariness as a consequence of the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*. This means that the formulation explains the difference between passing judgement and suspending judgement.*

NDAC deals with this criterion in cases where the reason to doubt that P is such that the confidence in P and \neg P is balanced, and it is therefore reasonable to suspend judgment on P and \neg P. The difference between

passing judgment and suspending judgment is explained by the presence of reasons on the basis of which one can conclude that the confidence in P or $\neg P$ is exactly the same. If someone were to believe that there are an even number of grains of sand on the beach, then, given the background knowledge someone would have under normal circumstances, there is a reason to doubt that P and it is such that the confidence in the number being even is exactly the same as the number being odd. In this case, background knowledge would consist of things such as that everything that is countable either has to be odd or even; grains of sand are countable; in order to conclude whether something countable is even or odd one in fact needs to count the countable things; and it is practically impossible to count the number of grains of sand on the beach. From this background knowledge one can deduce that whatever confidence one has in thinking that the number is odd, one necessarily has exactly the same confidence in thinking that it is even. This shows that there is a clear explanation for the difference between passing and suspending judgment. Hence, this criterion is satisfied.

7.6.5 Criterion 5: avoiding uninterestingness

A plausible principle of justification produces epistemically interesting results. This means that it produces justification of such nature and degree that it contributes sufficiently to attaining an epistemic goal.

Although I do not consider NDAC necessarily aimed at attaining the/a particular truth, I did have this goal in mind when developing it. As with most versions of conservatism, the defeat condition is essential for attaining the truth goal. Furthermore, it is accepted that, amongst the prima facie justified beliefs of a person, there is a significant number of true beliefs. This seems a plausible assumption, especially if one considers justified belief formation a necessary condition for justified belief maintenance. Even without this necessary condition it might be plausible to assume that a significant part of the beliefs we hold are true—a point I discuss in more detail below.

Based on the foregoing, the primary question is: will the defeat condition “get rid” of enough false beliefs so that justification in NDAC will, *ultima facie*, help to attain the truth goal? It will, if reasonable doubt about a proposition is correlated with that proposition being false. Although it seems completely reasonable to assume that any false beliefs we hold will more likely correlate with reasons to doubt those beliefs, it is also not unreasonable to think that there are many true beliefs for which we can have a weak reason in favour of a positive doxastic attitude that $\neg P$ —still a reason to doubt that P in NDAC. Thus, NDAC runs the risk of getting rid of too many true beliefs and, although it seems reasonable that it will still help in attaining the truth goal by removing many false beliefs and hence justification would correlate with relatively more true beliefs than false beliefs, its efficacy in justifying true beliefs is somewhat reduced. This might be partly regained by using the graded version of NDAC, since then weak reasons to doubt that P will likely lead to the justification of continuing to hold on to a belief to a lower degree. The justified degree of belief is then correlated with the likelihood of it being true in the context of the truth goal. In any case, NDAC—especially the graded version—will contribute to attaining the truth goal and hence is epistemically interesting.

7.6.6 Criterion 6: avoiding backward reasoning

A plausible principle of justification does not use the fact that a person already holds a belief as a reason to form that belief.

NDAC is intended as a principle that provides justification for belief maintenance. Hence, it does not claim that a belief can be justifiably formed because a person already holds it. However, in the graded version of NDAC the appropriate response to a relatively weak reasonable doubt is to “downgrade” the degree of belief justified. However, is this not actually forming a belief to a certain degree on the basis of a degree of belief a person already holds? For example, when S is certain that P , a relatively weak reasonable doubt defeats the justification for this certainty, yet

in graded NDAC, S is justified in continuing to suspect that P. Is the fact that S is certain that P not being used to justify the formation of S's suspicion that P?

As suggested above, if one takes the (admittedly controversial) position that prima facie justification for the belief that P to degree D is also potentially prima facie justification for the belief that P with lower degrees than D, then this is not a problem. There is no justification for belief formation, but only justification for belief maintenance to a lower degree.

If one does think that justification for the maintenance of a lower degree of belief amounts to justification for belief formation, then this criterion would not be satisfied for graded NDAC. However, this position is itself problematic, since it means that one claims that believing that P to degree D is categorically different in terms of belief formation from believing that P to a degree lower than D. Thus, lowering one's degree of belief that P would be the same as forming a completely different belief. This seems problematic since the content of both beliefs "P" remains the same and the attitude only changes in intensity. It is my intuition that lowering a degree of belief is not the same as forming a new belief. Hence, in graded NDAC, would a belief not be a reason to justify a belief one already holds? The non-graded version of NDAC satisfies this criterion in any case and given the assumptions made above, graded NDAC satisfies the criterion as well.

7.6.7 Criterion 7: avoiding overly liberal defeaters

A plausible principle of justification avoids overly liberal defeaters. This means that a version of conservatism that relies on a defeat condition that is satisfied for every belief a person has, is implausible.

The reference to Descartes' so-called method of doubt in the beginning of this chapter might raise the concern that NDAC should make one doubt every belief and hence defeat the prima facie justification for every belief.

Is NDAC ultimately another expression of Cartesian doubt applied here to mere belief?

Doubt in NDAC is different from Cartesian doubt because on NDAC it is about particular, rather than universal doubt. One might say that NDAC localises doubt to the particular reasons related to P and $\neg P$, as opposed to the generalised doubt of scepticism, which applies to any propositions in the target domain. Assuming that scepticism is bracketed, as I argued in section 7.2, there is no reason to think that for each and every particular belief there exists a particular reason to doubt that belief.⁶³ Therefore, this criterion is satisfied as well.

7.6.8 Criterion 8: avoiding evidential ignorance

In a plausible principle of justification, evidence related to a belief is not ignored—evidence has a function in the principle.

Clearly, NDAC makes it possible for evidence and reasons related to P to influence justification since evidence counting against P will lead to defeat of the prima facie justification for the maintenance of the belief that P . Hence, evidence can play a crucial role in conservatism. However, evidence that supports believing that P does not seem to serve a role in NDAC. In McCain's version of conservatism, evidence in favour of P did play a role, but as a consequence, justification of mere belief became dependent on either better reasons for P than for $\neg P$, or a more coherent relationship with S 's other beliefs of P than $\neg P$. Hence, it seems problematic to include supporting evidence for P in a conservative principle of justification. Although supporting evidence might be included if it can defeat the reasons in favour of $\neg P$, because then the reason for

63 Note that this also means that the threshold for reasonable doubt on NDAC is higher than for Cartesian doubt. In a Cartesian sceptical argument, the mere logical possibility of $\neg P$ is sufficient to defeat a knowledge claim given the closure principle that states that if S knows that P , then S can exclude the chance that $\neg P$ is possible. However, the mere logical possibility of $\neg P$ does not seem to be a particular reason for $\neg P$ such that confidence in $\neg P$ is raised, and hence in the case of NDAC, it would not lead to reasonable doubt.

doubt would itself be defeated, this is not sufficient to deal with cases in which there is evidential support for P without it defeating the reasons for doubt.

However, as discussed in the section on avoiding arbitrariness, this is not problematic if one is willing to accept that epistemic conservatism only provides a sufficiency condition for justified belief maintenance. In a complete theory of justification, an evidential and conservative principle might be combined to provide justification. This does not devalue conservatism because conservatism was motivated by the fact that it can explain why we have many beliefs that we think are justified to hold without evidence. In case a person has sufficient evidence or reasons in favour of P to justify maintaining the belief that P, there is no need to apply a conservative principle. However, an evidential principle will often be too demanding and hence in many cases, epistemic conservatism is needed. In those cases, NDAC is nonetheless sensitive to the available evidence, and it has a crucial function within NDAC. Therefore, this criterion is satisfied.

7.6.9 NDAC is plausible

Since all criteria have been satisfied, I conclude that NDAC is a plausible version of conservatism and, furthermore, is superior to other versions. Unlike McCain's version of conservatism, additional requirements for justified belief maintenance are not "smuggled in" through the defeat condition and hence NDAC is a genuine version of epistemic conservatism.

So far, I have assumed that justified belief formation is a necessary condition for justified belief maintenance. Based on this assumption, a conservative principle is always twinned with a principle of justification for belief formation. However, in the next section I will argue that this might not even be necessary.

7.7 Radically Weak Conservative Foundationalism

Epistemic conservatism is typically understood as a form of modest or non-classical foundationalism (Hasan and Fumerton 2018).⁶⁴ Foundationalism is the view that knowledge or justified belief are either non-inferentially justified themselves or are ultimately based on non-inferentially justified beliefs. These non-inferentially justified beliefs, called basic beliefs, are the foundations of justification or knowledge. Traditionally, these foundations are expected to be certain—i.e., indubitable, incorrigible, and infallible. However, in the late 20th century, epistemologists proposed “modest” versions of foundationalism that did not require the foundations to be any of the above (Poston n.d., section 4.a.ii). Taking this idea to an extreme is Laurence BonJour (1985) when he describes weak foundationalism:

*[a view] according to which basic beliefs possess only a very low degree of epistemic justification on their own, a degree of justification insufficient by itself either to satisfy the adequate-justification condition for knowledge or to qualify them as acceptable justifying premises for further beliefs. Such beliefs are only “initially credible”, rather than fully justified. (27)*⁶⁵

Since I have argued that we should understand conservatism as a principle for belief maintenance and not belief formation, one might wonder whether conservatism could still be considered a form of foundationalism. One might argue that one would need an additional principle of justification for the formation of foundational beliefs.

However, I think it might be possible to have justified beliefs that can serve as foundations without the need for an additional principle of justi-

64 Although associated with foundationalism, it seems that one can equally utilise conservatism in a coherent theory of justification.

65 Note that BonJour himself takes issue with this version of foundationalism because, amongst others, it is unclear how a higher degree of justification—sufficient for knowledge—can ultimately come from such a weak foundation. Hence, he says, weak foundationalism should be dismissed (BonJour 1985).

fication, although one does need to make additional, arguably non-conservative assumptions: 1) the results of our belief-forming processes are such that at least some minimal amount of beliefs are true; and 2) the defeat condition can identify a sufficient number of false beliefs a person has formed.⁶⁶ For example, if a person forms 100 beliefs, at least 20 of which are true, and a defeat condition can at least identify 61 out of the 80 remaining false beliefs, then a person has more true beliefs (20) than false beliefs (19). If the defeat condition is even more successful, the ratio of true to false beliefs increases even more. In theory, it could even lead to infallible justification if the defeat condition is completely apt in identifying false beliefs, although it seems unlikely that such an accurate defeat condition could be discovered. The main question is thus: how plausible are these assumptions?

The first assumption is plausible since it seems very unlikely that all, or nearly all, of the beliefs a person has formed are false and hence for each belief there is at least some likelihood, albeit minimally, that it is true.⁶⁷ Note that this presumes a common sense or “normal” view of our epistemic situation. One can imagine that there are sceptical scenarios in which all our beliefs are false and hence justification on conservatism would not help in attaining more true than false beliefs. However, these scenarios would similarly apply to assumptions in other (competing) principles of justification and hence this is not a particular worry for this version of foundationalism. For example, if one were to consider foundational beliefs to be justified because they are based on experience and one has assumed that this makes these beliefs more likely to be true, one can equally conceive of a sceptical scenario in which all of a person’s beliefs are false.

66 These assumptions take the truth goal for granted, but of course the notion of “false beliefs” can be substituted for other qualifications of propositions that fit the chosen epistemic goal.

67 Note that Aristotle suggests something similar when he says that men have a natural disposition to arrive at the truth and usually do (*Rhetoric* I.1, 1355a15f; Aristotle 1991).

The second assumption is plausible since it seems likely that defeaters are so by virtue of their ability to identify false beliefs. One might say that defeaters are falsehood-conducive: a belief for which there is a defeater is likely to be false. For example, if we believe that a stick that is half-submerged in water is bent, but we are shown that this is an optical illusion (the defeater), then it is the defeater that shows the falsehood of our belief. In fact, trying to show the falsehood of conservatism seems to confirm the assumption as well, because if one wanted to show the falsehood of conservatism by showing that beliefs that are intuitively unjustified—such as that there are an even number of grains of sand on the beach—are justified on conservatism, it seems one has to assume that conservatism is likely to be false if one has a defeater for it. Hence, this assumption seems fundamental to epistemic deliberation itself.

Note that conservatism is usually taken as an internalist version of foundationalism (Hasan and Fumerton 2018). However, one might choose to differ over whether defeaters should be internalist or externalist (see the discussion in section 1.5.4). The outcome of that discussion would also determine whether radically weak foundationalism should be understood internally or externally.

This radically weak form of conservative foundationalism specifies a sufficient, but not necessary, condition for justification. Therefore, it is not intended to show that all justified beliefs can be inferred from the basic beliefs in this version of foundationalism. Hence, this radically weak conservative foundationalism should be seen as giving one kind of basic belief in addition to other kinds of basic belief.

7.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have proposed a new version of epistemic conservatism in which reasonable doubt about a belief defeats the *prima facie* justification for the maintenance of that belief. I formulated two variations of this no-doubt account of epistemic conservatism: one on the basis of belief simpliciter (NDAC) and one on the basis of degrees of belief (graded NDAC). In both versions the *prima facie* justification for maintaining the belief that P is defeated if S ought to doubt that P because of the pres-

ence of a reason to doubt that P. I have evaluated NDAC on the basis of the criteria I have formulated in previous chapters and found that they were all satisfied. Therefore, based on the criteria I have formulated, I conclude that doxastic conservatism is a plausible theory of justification. Assuming the plausibility of conservatism, I have argued that conservatism can be used to formulate a radically weak conservative foundationalism in which a belief cannot be considered justifiably formed, but it can nonetheless be justified to hold on to. This means that epistemic conservatism can lead to an additional kind of basic belief, in addition to other basic beliefs.

Chapter 8

Amongst Family: Phenomenal Conservatism, Dogmatism, and Credulism

A review of current literature reveals a number of epistemological positions that bear a family resemblance to epistemic conservatism (EC). Most notable amongst them are: phenomenal conservatism (sometimes framed as the plausible alternative to EC), dogmatism, and credulism. The aim of this chapter is not only to clarify the relationship between EC and these family members, but also to show that being precise about the claims of EC shows why it is not as implausible as its opponents claim.

8.1 Phenomenal Conservatism

8.1.1 Current discussion

“Whatever seems to be true is a good reason to believe it to be true.” This is the core intuition that phenomenal conservatists try to capture. A prolific contributor to this line of thinking is Michael Huemer (2007), who has formulated phenomenal conservatism (PC) as follows:

Huemer’s PC *If it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that p. (30)*

This idea has been supported by a number of philosophers, although, as we will see later, for some at least, its interpretation warrants a label other than PC.⁶⁸ A key question in the discussion concerns the nature of seemings or appearances. The answer to this question is important to the relation between EC and PC because it reveals the true nature of their family relationship. Chris Tucker (2013, 3–7) describes four views about the nature of appearances. As I will argue, no matter which view one takes, PC is a different view than EC—albeit one not necessarily in direct competition with EC. In addition, as I further argue, PC is not necessarily more plausible than EC regardless of which view one takes. The four views identified by Tucker (2013) are as follows:

<i>Belief view</i>	<i>A seeming that P is a belief that P.</i>
<i>Inclination view</i>	<i>A seeming that P is an inclination, disposition, or attraction to believe that P.</i>
<i>Evidence-taking view</i>	<i>A seeming that P is a belief or an inclination to believe of some mental state M that it counts in favour of P.</i>
<i>Experience view</i>	<i>A seeming that P is an experience with the content P or a sui generis propositional attitude that P. (3–7)</i>

68 To name a few supporters: William Lycan (1988, 165–166), Richard Swinburne (2001, 142–142), Ernest Sosa (2007, 258–259), and Jim Pryor (2000, 547).

At first glance, the belief view would make PC nearly indistinguishable from EC—as they say in “PC circles”: doxastic conservatism. It should, however, come as no surprise that this is not a view that is endorsed by many supporters of PC since it is widely assumed that doxastic conservatism is implausible. In fact, Nathan Hanna (2011) even argues that PC inevitably leads to doxastic conservatism and should therefore be rejected. He argues that beliefs can behave like appearances and therefore a belief can confer justification upon its contents according to PC, however, he argues, it is obviously absurd that a belief can confer justification upon its contents (Hanna 2011, 218).

However, any staunch defender of EC should reject this argument because it is very much a misnomer. Substituting “appearance” for “belief” in PC does not lead to EC. Furthermore, it would be wrong to suggest that defenders of EC have claimed that having a belief is a reason to form that belief, even if this is what is implied by the substitution in the “belief view”. It is clear that PC aims for justification for belief formation and possibly also belief maintenance, but it is certainly not exclusively aimed at belief maintenance in the same manner as EC. Hence, the *reductio ad absurdum* of Hanna’s and Huemer’s quick dismissal of EC are based on a misinterpretation of EC that should not in itself influence our opinion on the plausibility of EC.

Nonetheless, defenders of PC, not committed in any way to the belief view, consider appearances and beliefs distinguishable.⁶⁹ Huemer (2007, 30–31) has argued that sensory illusions demonstrate that seeming is different from believing. For example, in the case of the diffractive properties of light through water, it can seem that a stick is bent when placed partially under water without one actually believing that the stick is bent. For this reason, this view is not representative of PC.

The inclination view has a stronger following in PC circles. According to Tucker (2013, 5) this view can be found in the work of Swinburne (2001, 141–142; 2018, 325–326), Sosa (1998, 258–259; 2007, Ch. 7), and Rogers

69 See McCain (2012) for a rebuttal of Hanna’s argument.

and Matheson (2011).⁷⁰ In this instance, it seems that in the case of sensory illusions, one can indeed feel an inclination to believe without in fact believing the sensory illusion. Moreover, as Tucker (2013) states, this view “makes seemings non-mysterious by reducing them to something that we apparently understand” (5). Nonetheless, one can, according to Huemer (2007), be so convinced of the falsehood of a sensory illusion that one is not even inclined to believe it. Moreover, he argues, appearances can non-trivially explain inclinations to believe (Huemer 2007, 31). For example, I can be inclined to believe that there is a white cat on the couch because that is how it seems to me (Huemer 2007, 31). Conversely, I can be inclined to believe something without this appearing to be true for me—for example, if I really want my sports team to win and I am inclined to believe they are going to win because of my optimism or wishful thinking even though it seems to me that they are about to lose (Huemer 2007, 31).

The evidence-based view is derived from both the belief and inclination view. However, it does not depend on either the belief or inclination that *P*, but rather on a higher-order attitude completely. An example by Tucker is that if it seems to someone *S* that a police officer is standing in front of him, then, according to the evidence-taking view, *S* believes or is inclined to believe that a mental state, such as the sensation of the blue uniform, is the evidence that there is a police officer in front of *S* (Tucker 2013, 7). However, Huemer (2013) rejects this view because, according to him, wishful thinking can lead to an inclination to believe, or indeed belief about, a given mental state. Hence, they should not serve as evidence (Huemer 2013, 336).

Instead, most philosophers in the discussion on PC take appearances to be an experience.⁷¹ This position avoids the issues mentioned above. It is a widely held view amongst philosophers that experiences can justify

70 Swinburne’s (2001) formulation also includes the belief view of seeming: “every proposition that a subject believes or is inclined to believe has (in so far as it is basic) in his noetic structure a probability corresponding to the strength of the belief or semi-belief or inclination to believe” (141).

71 Tucker (2013, 6) names Lycan (1988), Pryor (2000), Huemer (2007), Bealer (2000), Chudnoff (2011), Cullison (2010), Skene (2013), and himself as proponents of this view.

the content of a belief, and hence this view aligns with widely held intuitions about justification.⁷² Tucker (2013, 6) points out that the main criticism of this view is that it remains unclear what kind of experience an appearance is, whereas it is thought to be clear what a belief and an inclination to believe are. Defenders of PC struggle to show what kind of experience an appearance is beyond the examples they can give. This might lead to doubt as to whether there really is a specific experience called “seeming” in the first place (Tucker 2013, 6–7).

On the one hand, arguments in favour of PC state that it is a natural view of perception, intuition, and memory; that PC avoids scepticism and the problem of infinite regress in epistemology; that it provides solutions for various epistemic problems such as the “speckled hen problem”, expert recognition, and coherentist explanationism; and that PC can provide a unified account for all non-inferentialist justification (Tucker 2013, 8–9).⁷³ Huemer (2013, 338–341) even claims that PC can provide a unified account for inferentialist and non-inferentialist accounts, and that denying PC would be self-defeating (Huemer 2007, 39–42). On the other hand, objections suggest that “crazy” appearances would carry undeserved justificatory force. For example, if it just seems to someone that some extreme ideology is true and it seems right to kill people who disagree, PC would consider this a justified belief (Tooley 2013, 320–321). Moreover, an appearance can be caused by something epistemically illegitimate (e.g., wishful thinking), making it a problematic justifier (Tucker 2013, 14). Finally, having a seeming gives an illegitimate “extra boost” to existing justification—i.e., if suddenly it appears for S that the counterbalanced proposition is true, then S receives the “extra boost” that makes the proposition justified (a similar objection has been raised

72 For an overview on support for this view and accompanying intuitions amongst philosophers, see Silins (2021).

73 The “speckled hen problem” says that we are incapable of knowing all aspects of our mental state—for example, if one sees a speckled hen, one will not be capable of knowing how many speckles the hen has just by virtue of having the experience, even though the hen has a determinate number of speckles (e.g., Chisholm, 1942).

against EC; Tucker 2013, 14–15). The validity of such arguments is not a topic of this thesis, however, they are sometimes relevant for the comparison with EC, to which I now turn.

8.1.2 Comparing EC and PC

According to Huemer (n.d., section 1.d), EC is an unpopular view that endorses circular reasoning, its counterintuitiveness decisively illustrated by Richard Foley's (1983) paper. PC, Huemer (n.d., section 1.d) suggests, is unaffected by such problems. It should be clear by now that both Huemer's and Tucker's (2013, 2, endnote 5) representation of EC is, to say the least, somewhat unnuanced. Yet before presenting a better representation of the differences and similarities between PC and EC, it is interesting to note that Foley's (1983) counterexamples might just as easily affect PC. Take for instance the grains of sand example (Foley 1983, 174). If it seems for a person that "there are an even number of grains of sand on the beach", would not the same issue arise for PC as it did for EC? Of course, one can reply that it is a strange appearance to have, but it would also be a strange belief to have, and hence it is not clear whether, in comparison, this offers a viable objection to EC. Huemer (n.d., section 1.d) himself seems to refer to another objection by Foley (1983, 176) that seems to resemble the "extra boost" objection discussed in chapter 5 section 6 of this dissertation. Foley's objection says that EC is committed to saying that a proposition, P, for which S has almost enough evidence for P to be justified will become justified as soon as it is believed (1983, 176). Again, if this objection holds, it is equally problematic for PC as it is for EC, since just as a person can just happen to start believing that P, a person can start having an appearance that P. It is rather odd that Huemer makes this argument against EC, since the "extra boost" argument has been levied against PC as well (Tooley 2013; Tucker 2013, 13). In any case, I do not see how these examples manifest a key difference between PC and EC in terms of their plausibility.

Huemer's objection that EC is circular points to a clear difference in scope: PC is a justificatory principle for both belief formation and, presumably, belief maintenance, whereas I argue EC can only be a justifi-

catory principle for the latter. This also means that these principles do not need to compete with each other. It is possible that justification for belief formation is due to PC, whereas the justification for retaining that belief is due to EC. In such a case, an appearance is the justification of the belief, but it is not necessary to continue to have that appearance in order for the belief to remain justified. This also highlights that the source of prima facie justification is very different for the two principles. PC has a special kind of experience (assuming the experience view) as the source of prima facie justification, whereas for EC, this is because a person holds the belief.

Moving now to the role of defeaters, in EC they occupy a central position, whereas in PC, discussion on the role of defeaters is almost absent. One might argue that this is because PC is not committed to a specific view of defeaters—something one might even see as an additional argument for PC. However, it seems that questions that arise for EC on the role of defeaters could equally arise for PC. For example, how do defeaters work with conflicting appearances? When it seems to S that a stick is bent under water, but when S touches the stick it seems straight, do both appearances work as a defeater for the beliefs that would follow from the appearances? If so, can there be “degrees of appearance” and how will defeat work in a case of conflicting appearances? Just as these discussions are relevant for the plausibility of EC, I consider them relevant for the plausibility of PC. Indeed, their discussion might be more entangled than contemporary literature assumes.

In conclusion, EC and PC are distinct views that have different aims. The former is aimed at the justification of belief maintenance, whereas the latter is also aimed at belief formation. This means that PC and EC do not necessarily compete with each other, but can be complementary. The arguments against EC levied by proponents of PC wrongly assume that EC is trying to do the same justificatory work as PC and therefore, on closer inspection, these arguments fail. This in turn shows that PC is not necessarily superior to EC, no matter what view on the nature of appearances one takes.

8.2 Dogmatism and Credulism

8.2.1 Pryor's view on dogmatism and credulism

Jim Pryor (2000) has argued in favour of a view called dogmatism. In his earlier work, this meant a specific view on the justification of beliefs on the basis of perceptual experiences (Pryor 2000).⁷⁴ However, more recently he has argued that this is just one particular view on dogmatism and that the notion can include many more views (Pryor 2013). He now uses the term “to name the general thesis that justification is sometimes both immediate and underminable” (Pryor 2013, 97).⁷⁵ With the term “underminable” he means the possibility of immediate justification to be undermined by defeaters for which a person has no epistemically antecedent grounds for ruling out. With immediate justification he means justification for believing something without this in any way coming from, or being constituted by, something else one is justified in believing. Conversely, immediate justification at least in part comes from, or is constituted by, another belief that is justified.

Moreover, Pryor (2013, 98) argues that there is an even more inclusive view: “credulism”. In this view, one can have justification for a belief whilst at least some part of that justification can be undermined by a defeater, even though one was not required to rule out that potential underminer antecedently in order to be justified. This means that a dogmatist is a credulist, but a credulist is not necessarily a dogmatist. Pryor (2013) uses the following example to clarify the difference:

You have the evidence E, that a certain barometer is falling. E together with other things you are justified in believing—for example, about reli-

74 He describes this view as follows: “The dogmatist about perceptual justification says that when it perceptually seems to you as if p is the case, you have a kind of justification for believing p that does not presuppose or rest on your justification for anything else, which could be cited in an argument (even an ampliative argument) for p ” (Pryor 2000, 519).

75 Note that this appears to be a far weaker notion than the usual connotation of the term “dogmatism”.

able connections between that barometer and the upcoming weather—justify you in believing H, that there will soon be rain. (100)

According to Pryor, a dogmatist might say that the justification for E is itself underminable but immediate, and therefore does not require a further proposition for which one has antecedent justification. A credulist, however, might still require some further propositions to have antecedent justification, but not all of them. In the example given above, the credulist might still require antecedent justification for the evidence that the barometer is reliable before H is justified, but might not require antecedent justification for the higher-order claim that E plus evidence of reliability of the barometer are sufficient for the justification of the belief that H. However, the credulist would still leave open the possibility that some evidence could show that the higher-order claim is not, or not sufficiently, justified and this in turn could lower the degree of justification for the belief that H (Pryor 2013, 100–101).

Pryor (2013) says that one can disagree on which parts of the justification need to be antecedently justified themselves in order to avoid the vulnerability of being undermined, but that it is practically impossible to completely avoid such a vulnerability. Therefore, he only sees two alternatives for credulism: First, for every vulnerability, antecedent justification is required in order for the target belief to be justified. Pryor says that one would need “a tower of antecedent justification [...] and every underminable part of that tower needs to be supported by its own antecedently justified tower, and so on ad infinitum” (103). This in turn seems to lead to scepticism about epistemic justification. The second alternative is a special kind of externalism that rules out every vulnerability to undermining because “S has in fact done everything properly” (103). Pryor says that this view claims that “if in fact you reasoned properly in such-and-such a respect, your confidence shouldn’t be threatened by evidence that you didn’t” (103). Yet, as Pryor notes, neither of these alternatives garner much support amongst epistemologists. Hence, most epistemologists are in fact credulists. Pryor implies that credulism is the

most plausible option for dealing with the vulnerability of undermining (Pryor 2013).

8.2.2 Is EC dogmatist or credulist?

Pryor defines dogmatism and credulism in general terms and thinks that many theories and principles of justification are included in this definition, but is EC also included? Turning first to dogmatism—the version that Pryor uses in his 2013 publication referenced above—there are only two questions that need to be answered affirmatively: is justification in epistemic conservatism underminable and is it immediate?

For Pryor, an undermining defeater is something that S learns or has justification to believe that weakens the support S has for believing that P. For example, if a person has an auditory experience that serves as evidence for believing that the radio is on, but is also inhaling smoke that might induce hallucinations, then the evidence of the smoke undermines his auditory evidence (Pryor 2013, 91–94). Does EC allow for such defeaters? It would seem not, because in EC there is no support upon which the justification for believing that P is based. However, whilst this applies to the justification for belief maintenance, every belief needs to be formed. If justified belief formation is a necessary condition for belief maintenance, then the justification for believing that P in EC can be undermined if one has learned or is justified in believing that the belief that P was unjustifiably formed. Yet, if one does not think that justified belief formation is a necessary condition for justified belief maintenance—for example, if one accepts my radically weak foundation-alism—undermining can still occur. For example, if one learns that it was impossible to form a true belief on the basis of testimony because every part of it was a lie, then this would count as a defeater in EC. Therefore, justification in EC can be underminable.

In the case of EC, justification comes from the mere fact that S believes that P and neither comes from, nor is constituted by, justification to believe something else. Hence, it seems to be immediate. However, this refers to the justification of belief maintenance. Can the label “immediate” be applied to this kind of justification as well? This depends on

whether justified belief formation is a necessary condition for justified belief maintenance or not. If so, then justification for belief formation (whether it be internalist or externalist) is part of, or constitutes, the prima facie justification of belief maintenance in EC and it is mediate justification. If not—for example, because one finds my radically weak foundationalism plausible—then there are no further justified beliefs in the justificatory chain and justification is immediate. Hence, EC can be understood in both a dogmatist and non-dogmatist sense.

Regardless of whether EC is dogmatist or not, it is definitely credulist. As I have argued above, undermining defeaters are included in EC and hence a belief can be both justified and underminable. Pryor's observation that many epistemologists are in some way credulist is relevant for the discussion on EC, since it might turn out that objections against EC are in fact objections to credulism. If so, such an objection should not make a defender of EC particularly worried, since it would be an objection against the larger project of epistemic justification, and hence the comparative plausibility of EC would not be challenged.

8.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that epistemic conservatism cannot be reduced to a version of phenomenal conservatism in which the notion of "seeming" is substituted with "belief", because epistemic conservatism is exclusively aimed at the justification of belief maintenance and not also belief formation—as is the case with phenomenal conservatism. Moreover, I have challenged the supposed superior plausibility of phenomenal conservatism over epistemic conservatism. Some objections to phenomenal conservatism can also be levied against epistemic conservatism and vice versa, so it would help the discussion on phenomenal conservatism if epistemic conservatism were taken seriously beyond its somewhat caricatured representations. In addition, depending on one's view on epistemic conservatism, one might consider it to be a dogmatist principle of justification, in the sense that Jim Pryor has recently used the term. In any case, given Pryor's definition, it can be considered a credulist principle. Since credulism appears to be a widespread idea within epistemology,

objections (albeit implicit) against epistemic conservatism that are in fact objections against credulism do not pose any particular threat.

The discussion on epistemic conservatism can be enriched by looking at its close family members and its reputation amongst the defenders of those family members might be improved by highlighting the similarities and differences between them. Moreover, this engagement does not reduce the plausibility of epistemic conservatism—it might even increase it. Therefore, it would be desirable to see more constructive family gatherings in the future.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to evaluate the plausibility of epistemic conservatism—the idea that the fact that one has a belief is sufficient, in the absence of defeaters, to be epistemically justified in maintaining that belief. In order to achieve this aim, a number of intermediate objectives had to be addressed.

My first objective was to set the stage: why is epistemic conservatism interesting and what exactly is it? On the question of interest, one might be attracted to conservatism because it explains our intuition that we have many beliefs that we think it would be unreasonable to doubt unless we have some special reason for doubting them. In addition, it explains why we can have a significant number of justified beliefs even though we have limited cognitive resources to achieve that. It also helps to explain why memory beliefs and beliefs for which evidence has been lost can remain justified. Finally, I have argued that its denial—epistemic revisionism—is a very unattractive proposition, not least because it implies that one should doubt every belief one has at every moment unless one can produce some form of evidence in support of those beliefs.

As to the second question—what is epistemic conservatism?—I have argued that epistemic conservatism needs to be understood as a principle of justification as opposed to a complete theory of justification. This means that it does not describe the necessary and sufficient conditions for each and every justified belief. The distinction between *prima facie* and *ultima facie* justification is essential here. In conservatism, every belief a person has, is *prima facie* justified for that person—a type of justification that can easily be lost in cases in which a defeater exists.

Moreover, a crucial distinction needs to be drawn between the justification of belief formation and belief maintenance. Conservatism is a principle regarding the latter, in light of which various objections lose their potency—most notably the objection that conservatism is circular.

This objection states that in conservatism, the fact that a person holds a belief is a reason for that person to form that belief. However, conservatism takes as given the fact that a person has a belief and then answers the question whether he or she should cease or continue to retain it.

This in turn raises the question: how should a principle of justified belief maintenance relate to a principle of justified belief formation? A reasonable position is that justified belief formation is a necessary condition for justified belief maintenance. For conservatism, this could mean that evidence of the absence of the justified formation of the belief in question could serve as a defeater. However, in chapter 7 I argued that under certain conditions, a person can be justified to retain a belief even if the belief was not justifiably formed (albeit whilst adding that one need not accept this in order to consider conservatism plausible).

After having set the stage, my second objective was to develop criteria for evaluating when a version of epistemic conservatism is plausible or not. These criteria are formulated in a general way such that they could apply to any principle of epistemic justification. The first three criteria are inspired by Agrippa's trilemma, a problem from classical philosophy that says that the justification of beliefs will either lead to an infinite regress, an arbitrary stopping point, or to circular reasoning. The remaining criteria were developed in light of the discussion of objections that have been levied against conservatism. Many good objections to (versions of) epistemic conservatism seem to assume the plausibility of certain criteria. This produces the following list of criteria:

Criterion 1: avoiding infinite regression

A plausible principle of justification does not require a person S to believe an infinite number of propositions in order for a belief that P to be justified for S.

Criterion 2: avoiding circularity

A plausible principle of justification avoids circularity, such that the belief that P is not justified by a chain of reasons that is grounded in the belief that P itself.

Criterion 3: avoiding arbitrariness

A plausible principle of justification is able to explain the difference between a justified and an unjustified belief.

Criterion 4: avoiding the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*

*A plausible principle of justification avoids arbitrariness as a consequence of the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*. This means that the principle explains the difference between passing judgment and suspending judgment.*

Criterion 5: avoiding uninterestingness

A plausible principle of justification produces epistemically interesting results. This means that it produces justification of such nature and degree that it contributes sufficiently to attaining an epistemic goal.

Criterion 6: avoiding backward reasoning

A plausible principle of justification does not use the fact that a person already holds a belief as a reason to form that belief.

Criterion 7: avoiding overly liberal defeaters

A plausible principle of justification avoids overly liberal defeaters. This means that a version of conservatism that relies on a defeat condition that is satisfied for every belief a person has, is implausible.

Criterion 8: avoiding evidential ignorance

In a plausible principle of justification, evidence related to a belief is not ignored—evidence has a function in the principle.

The argument that I make is that any principle of epistemic justification—and hence any version of conservatism—that satisfies each of these criteria can be considered plausible.

My third objective was to discuss and evaluate the objections to epistemic conservatism. Throughout this thesis I have dealt with a variety of objections. A significant number revolved around counterexamples, such as Foley's "sand grains on the beach" example, the "coin-toss" example, and

the example of the “two scientists”. Further, I discussed the “conversion” objection, the “extra boost” objection, the “unwarranted assertion” objection, and the “partiality” objection. Most of these examples and objections share the intuition that, on conservatism, justification seemingly arises from nothing or at least from something that is not relevant, namely the fact that a person simply holds a belief. The distinction between belief formation and belief maintenance answers some of the concerns that flow from this intuition. Yet, in the context of conservatism, one might still ask: What is it that justifies a belief? What is the justifier? Although the absence of defeaters is a necessary condition, it does not seem to be a justifier in and of itself. The conservative answer is that, at least *prima facie*, it is the fact that a person holds a belief that is the justifier.

The follow-up question—*why* this doxastic fact can justify belief maintenance—cannot be directly answered by the conservative. The answer to this question depends on the relation between justified belief formation and justified belief maintenance. One might argue that *prima facie* justification comes from the fact that a belief is justifiably formed—for instance, because it is based on evidence or due to a reliable process. Conversely, one might argue, as I do, that it stems from a minimal trustworthiness of the belief-forming process, even though it was not enough to create justification for belief formation on its own. In any case, this goes beyond the scope of a principle of belief maintenance. Perhaps this is where the intuition that drives many objections originates: epistemic conservatism is not a full-blown theory of epistemic justification, but “merely” a principle that requires interaction with other principles of justification. It would be interesting to see how conservatism might interact with other such principles of justification and, based on those interactions, whether the intuitions counting against conservatism would persist.

I have not found an objection that makes conservatism necessarily implausible. I have found, however, objections that are challenging to conservatism and that defeat particular versions of it. These objections have been translated into the abovementioned criteria. Hence, if a version of conservatism satisfies those criteria, those objections will

not affect it. I have also argued that my version of conservatism, developed in chapter 7 of this dissertation, satisfies all these criteria, and hence objections in current literature pose no threat. Even if one disagrees with my version, the fact that the objections do not appear to be necessarily fatal for conservatism should inspire further research into plausible versions of it.

My fourth objective was to evaluate various versions of conservatism that can be found in current literature. Again, I used the abovementioned criteria for this, although not all of them have been applied to each version because the list of criteria developed over the course of the dissertation. Versions of conservatism developed by Roderick Chisholm, Jonathan Kvanvig, and Kevin McCain have been discussed at length.

Chisholm's version—widely considered as the first formulation of epistemic conservatism—consists of two principles: The first is that a person's belief has a presumption in its favour if it is not explicitly contradicted by a conjunction of other beliefs that the person holds. The second principle is that a belief is acceptable if, and only if, it is not disconfirmed by the set of all beliefs that have a presumption in their favour. I concluded that this version was not plausible because it cannot satisfy criterion 3 and 4 at the same time.

Kvanvig has developed a higher-order version of conservatism, according to which a belief has a presumption in its favour if a person believes that there is something that shows that his belief is true and believes nothing else that he takes to show that this is not the case. I argued that this version, along with other possible versions of higher-order conservatism, cannot satisfy criterion 3: avoiding arbitrariness. This is because higher-order beliefs are not epistemically more interesting than first-order beliefs, and hence it is arbitrary to consider higher-order beliefs *prima facie* justified and first-order beliefs *prima facie* unjustified. Kvanvig's conservatism also runs the risk of an infinite regression of higher-order beliefs and hence fails to satisfy criterion 1. Finally, it does not seem to produce epistemically interesting results, meaning that it does not satisfy criterion 5. Therefore, higher-order conservatism in general, and Kvanvig's version in particular, is not plausible.

The version that McCain has presented is the most promising version so far. I concluded that it can satisfy all the criteria of conservatism. However, in order to do this, it had to sacrifice an essential part of conservatism: that mere belief that P is sufficient for prima facie justification. On McCain's version, a believer also needs to have reasons for holding P that are better than for believing that $\neg P$, or the belief needs to cohere better with the rest of a person's beliefs than its negation. Hence, McCain's proposal is not a version of epistemic conservatism in the first place and cannot provide the supposed virtues of conservatism.

My fifth objective was to formulate a version of conservatism that remains plausible without the sacrifice of essential components. Hence, my version states that a person is justified in retaining a belief in any case in which there is no reason to doubt that belief. I defined doubt as having at least some confidence in $\neg P$ even if there is some confidence in P , but without actually believing that P . A reason to doubt is then something that provides a reason for $\neg P$ that is sufficient to instil some confidence in $\neg P$ but not necessarily to believe that $\neg P$. Moreover, I developed an additional version of conservatism that takes degrees of belief into account. In this version, it might also be possible that a person is justified to hold on to a lesser degree of a given belief even if there is a reason to doubt that belief. This is the case when the degree of confidence in $\neg P$ a person has, is lower than that degree of belief. I argued that both versions satisfy all criteria and hence are plausible versions of conservatism. This means that the main research question can be answered affirmatively: epistemic conservatism is plausible.

I further argued that given a plausible version of conservatism, one can defend a radically weak version of foundationalism. According to this version, one can be justified in holding on to a belief even if it is not justifiably formed. It does require a minimal trust in the belief-forming process, such that it produces a significant number of true beliefs, but not necessarily more than false beliefs. If one subsequently assumes that the defeat condition can defeat a sufficient number of false beliefs, the end result will be a set of beliefs, the majority of which are true. If one

agrees that conservatism might be a plausible principle of justification, it would certainly warrant further research.

Finally, I gave some thought to the relation between epistemic conservatism and related views such as phenomenal conservatism, dogmatism, and credulism. I argued that the crucial difference between phenomenal and epistemic conservatism is that the former is a principle for the justification of belief formation and the latter is not. Moreover, I argued that under some circumstances epistemic conservatism can be considered a form of dogmatism as well as credulism—a point confirmed in Jim Pryor's definition of both concepts. I conclude that further discussion amongst these "family members" would be a fruitful endeavour towards increasing the understanding of all these views.

Summary

Introduction

We have many beliefs, yet we cannot immediately show sufficient supporting evidence for many of them, nor are we able to point to reliable sources from which many of our beliefs originate. Take for example beliefs such as that I am awake, that I like coffee, or that studying philosophy is not forbidden by law. Nonetheless, we hold on to such beliefs and we do not seem to be unreasonable for doing so.

Epistemic conservatism can explain why this is so. This principle says that if a person, S, in fact believes a proposition, P, then S is epistemically justified in holding on to the belief that P unless there is something that defeats this justification. Many philosophers think epistemic conservatism is implausible. In this dissertation I have evaluated the objections against epistemic conservatism, subsequently formulating eight criteria for a plausible version thereof. Moreover, I have put various versions of conservatism to the test, concluding them to be either implausible or fundamentally failing to be a proper version of conservatism in the first place. Instead, I propose my own version, which I argue is plausible.

Chapter 1: The Prima Facie Case For Epistemic Conservatism

Epistemic conservatism is motivated by the intuition that it seems unreasonable to doubt many beliefs unless we have a special reason to do so. Conservatism also explains why memory beliefs and beliefs for which we have lost evidence remain justified. Conservatism is superior to alternative explanations—evidentialism and preservationism. The evidentialist requires problematic second-order evidence or memorial experience, whilst the preservationist requires a problematic link to inaccessible facts in the past. Another often cited advantage of conservatism is its cognitive efficiency: it potentially requires a lot less cognitive resources in order for a belief to be justified. Finally, the denial of conservatism might lead to “epistemic revisionism” in which we need to doubt every belief we have at every moment unless we have something that justifies us holding on to those beliefs. This seems implausible and extremely

cognitively demanding. Epistemic conservatism's attractiveness in the light of the reasons given above demands serious attention from philosophers.

A number of analytical distinctions are crucial for the analysis and evaluation of epistemic conservatism. Especially important is the distinction between belief formation and belief maintenance. I argue that epistemic conservatism should be understood as a principle of justification of belief maintenance, but not of belief formation. This means that epistemic conservatism does not say that the fact that a person, S, has a belief that P justifies the formation of that belief, but rather that given the fact that S believes that P, S is allowed to maintain that belief unless its justification is defeated. Another important distinction is that between *prima facie* and *ultima facie*, or all things considered, justification. In conservatism, every belief S in fact has is *prima facie* justified for S and it is this *prima facie* justification that can be defeated. Other relevant distinctions are those between normative and descriptive justification, internalist and externalist justification, justification as activity or status, propositional and doxastic justification, and occurrent and dispositional justification.

Chapter 2: Ancient Preliminaries

Ancient philosophers, amongst them Sextus Empiricus, pointed towards a problem in epistemology that has become known as Agrippa's trilemma. The idea is that given the trilemma, knowledge—or in our case, epistemic justification—is impossible to acquire and we should therefore be epistemic sceptics. The trilemma arises when one assumes that a belief can only be justified if the belief is inferred from another belief that is itself justified. This raises the question why the latter belief is itself justified. Given the above assumption, there are only three possible scenarios to justify a belief: 1) one has to keep adding new justifying beliefs to the "chain" of inferred beliefs (i.e., an infinite regress of justifying beliefs has started); 2) a belief is inferred from a belief that is ultimately itself inferred from the original belief (i.e., it is circular reasoning); or 3) a belief is inferred from a belief that is itself not inferred from any other

belief (i.e., the process is arbitrarily stopped). Yet, in none of these scenarios does it seem possible to speak of a justified belief—hence the conclusion that justified belief is impossible.

Although the assumptions and hence the results of the trilemma can be challenged, it nonetheless points to some fundamental criteria that a plausible principle of justification should satisfy. I have expressed these criteria as follows.

Criterion 1: avoiding infinite regression

A plausible principle of justification does not require a person S to believe an infinite number of propositions in order for a belief that P to be justified for S.

Criterion 2: avoiding circularity

A plausible principle of justification avoids circularity, such that the belief that P is not justified by a chain of reasons that is grounded in the belief that P itself.

Criterion 3: avoiding arbitrariness

A plausible principle of justification is able to explain the difference between a justified and an unjustified belief.

If a proposed version of conservatism does not at least satisfy the above criteria, it can be considered implausible.

Chapter 3: The Genesis of Conservatism: Chisholm and Foley

Roderick Chisholm is widely considered to be the first philosopher who formulated a version of epistemic conservatism (although he did not coin it as such). Chisholm's conservatism consists of two principles on the basis of which a belief can acquire two different degrees of justification respectively. The first principle, C1, says that if a belief that is not explicitly contradicted by another belief a person has, it has a presumption in its favour—the lowest degree of justification in Chisholm's framework. The second principle, C2, states that a belief is acceptable—a slightly

higher degree of justification—if it is not disconfirmed by a person’s set of beliefs that have a presumption in their favour.

Richard Foley criticises epistemic conservatism, in particular Chisholm’s version, deeming it implausible. His main argument is that epistemic conservatism is committed to the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*—i.e., that the absence of evidence for a proposition can justify the opposite proposition. According to Foley, conservatism would justify believing that there is an odd number of grains of sand on the beach simply because there is no evidence for believing that there is an even number of grains. Foley analysed this problem in terms of an absence of evidence, however, this implicitly assumes that evidence is a necessary condition for justification—exactly the assumption that is challenged by the conservative. Instead, I analyse the fallacy *ad ignorantiam* in terms of whether to pass judgment or suspend judgment about the truth of a proposition: the real question here is whether or not conservatism leads to an arbitrary passing or suspending of judgment. The objection of Foley can be transformed into the following criterion:

Criterion 4: avoiding the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*

*A plausible principle of justification avoids arbitrariness as a consequence of the fallacy *ad ignorantiam*. This means that the principle explains the difference between passing judgment and suspending judgment.*

Chisholm’s conservatism satisfies criterion 1 and 2. However, C1 does not satisfy criterion 3, since it does not really explain the difference between a justified and unjustified belief. In this principle a belief, B1, can be defeated if it contradicts another belief, B2, however, the principle does not say why the *prima facie* justification for B1 should be defeated by B2, rather than the other way around.

A possible solution is that one should consider both B1 and B2 to defeat the *prima facie* justification of each other. However, this is implausible given Chisholm’s second principle, which says that disconfirming evidence explains the difference between a belief being justified and unjustified (*qua* being acceptable): if B2 is disconfirmed by evidence and

B1 is not, then B1 would be acceptable, but B2 would not. This would create the counterintuitive situation in which a belief for which there is neither a contradicting belief nor disconfirming evidence has the same epistemic status—namely being acceptable—as a belief that is explicitly contradicted, but for which there is no disconfirming evidence. This situation is not compatible with Chisholm’s understanding of the hierarchy of justification.

Another possible solution is to privilege some beliefs, such that when another belief contradicts that which is privileged, it is the other belief for which justification is defeated and not the privileged belief. Such a privileged belief is either fallible or infallible—i.e., it is possible that disconfirming evidence shows the belief to be either false or impossible. If the belief is fallible then, on C1, justification could be defeated on the basis of a belief that itself would be disconfirmed by the evidence—i.e., the results from the different principles could conflict. Hence, such stumbling blocks need to be infallible. Such beliefs would be self-evident beliefs or logically necessary beliefs. Yet this also creates problems, since there will be relatively few beliefs that contradict these beliefs and hence on Chisholm’s first principle most beliefs, including many that contradict each other, will have a presumption in their favour. Similar issues are present in C2. Therefore, Chisholm’s conservatism does not satisfy criterion 3.

Moreover, Chisholm’s conservatism does not satisfy criterion 4 either because his principles only allow for a belief to be justified or unjustified, but not to suspend judgment altogether. Hence, Chisholm’s conservatism is implausible.

The evaluation of Chisholm’s conservatism also leads to the question whether conservatism can deliver epistemically interesting results. The concern is that it cannot and that it is therefore implausible. The following criterion expresses this concern:

Criterion 5: avoiding uninterestingness

A plausible principle of justification produces epistemically interesting results. This means that it produces justification of such nature and degree that it contributes sufficiently to attaining an epistemic goal.

Chapter 4: Higher-order Conservatism

Jonathan Kvanvig has argued that the problem of epistemic conservatism is its focus on first-order beliefs and first-order defeaters. He gives two counterexamples for first-order conservatism. The first is that a person, Joe, can believe that God exists and at the same time believe that there are good reasons against this belief, thus considering his own belief irrational. In first-order conservatism, Joe's belief would be justified even though this is very counterintuitive. Kvanvig argues that first-order conservatism cannot be saved by simply adding a higher-order defeat condition, for example that if Joe believes that his belief is irrational, then his belief in God is defeated. This is shown by his second counterexample in which another individual, Jack, believes that disaster will strike the earth at some fixed point in the future, but also believes he has no reason whatsoever to believe this is so. This belief is also justified on conservatism even if a higher-order defeat condition is added.

Yet, conservatism can still be saved according to Kvanvig. He argues that if we were to understand conservatism as a principle about higher-order defeaters and higher-order beliefs it can be plausible. He formulates his version of higher-order conservatism as follows:

Necessarily, if S believes that P, believes that there is something that shows that S's belief that P is true, and believes nothing else that he takes to show that it is not the case that there is something that shows that S's belief that P is true, then S's belief that P has some presumption in its favour for S.

The essence of higher-order conservatism is that the presence of higher-order beliefs and the absence of higher-order defeating beliefs is

crucial for justification. Hence, one can think of different variations of higher-order conservatism in addition to Kvanvig's version of it.

A problem for Kvanvig's version is the absence of further higher-order defeaters. It seems arbitrary that the mere absence of a second-order defeater in Jack's counterexample is problematic, but the mere absence of a third-order defeater is not. In Kvanvig's logic, he would have to add an additional higher-order belief, which itself needs to be free of a defeating higher-order belief. However, again the mere absence of a higher-order defeating belief is problematic, and hence more higher-order beliefs and higher-order defeat conditions need to be added and an infinite regress of higher-order beliefs and higher-order defeat conditions has started. This means that Kvanvig's version does not satisfy criterion 1 or, if one simply stops adding additional higher-order beliefs and higher-order defeat conditions, one cannot ultimately explain the difference between a justified and unjustified belief, and hence criterion 3 is not satisfied.

One might try to rescue higher-order conservatism from this dilemma by arguing that there is something that stops the regress. This could, for example, be a particular experience, for example, the experience of reflection, a reliable process of thinking about beliefs, or considering higher-order beliefs as epistemically "privileged". All such solutions need to make the implausible assumption that higher-order beliefs are fundamentally different from first-order beliefs in terms of epistemic status. Yet, there is no reason to think that there is such an epistemically relevant difference. Hence, there is no way out of the dilemma between either satisfying criterion 1 or 3.

It would appear that regarding criterion 4, higher-order conservatism is not in trouble: it is possible to amend its formulations such that it is possible to suspend judgment. However, it is questionable whether it can provide epistemically interesting results (criterion 5). There is no reason to think that the presence of higher-order beliefs will significantly increase the likelihood of a belief being true—i.e., higher-order conservatism does not help to achieve the truth goal. The same seems to be true for the epistemic goal of understanding: higher-order beliefs do not increase understanding. Regarding consistency, higher-order

conservatism seems to have some success, for example, in cases such as Joe's and, perhaps, Jack's belief. However, a great number of possible inconsistencies remain, since as long as S does not believe that there is something that is inconsistent with his belief, justification for such a belief is not defeated in higher-order conservatism. Therefore, criterion 5 is not satisfied. Since higher-order conservatism fails to satisfy several criteria for a plausible principle of justification, I conclude that it is implausible.

Chapter 5: Further Objections to Epistemic Conservatism

Since the publications of Chisholm, Foley, and Kvanvig, many more objections against conservatism have been raised. For those objections that are upheld, I have formulated additional criteria for the plausibility of a principle of justification.

The first objection I discuss is the "coin-toss" objection. Imagine a person flipping a coin, and then, without seeing the result, forming the belief that it landed "tails" up. According to this objection, conservatism is committed to saying that this person is justified in believing that it landed tails up even though it is obviously unreasonable to believe so. This challenge to conservatism is similar to Foley's objection to the grains of sand on the beach example, and hence the criterion I developed from that objection, criterion 4, applies here as well. Note that the objection seems to assume that conservatism claims that the fact that a person forms a belief is sufficient reason for one to form it. Conservatism should be understood as a principle of justification for belief maintenance and hence is not affected by this objection. Still this kind of counterexample would be problematic if the conservative principle was about belief formation. Hence, another criterion for a plausible principle of justification can be derived:

Criterion 6: avoiding backward reasoning

A plausible principle of justification does not use the fact that a person already holds a belief as a reason to form that belief.

Another objection is that conservatism cannot be reconciled with the causal account of the so-called “basing relationship”: the idea that a belief is justified by a reason if the reason also caused the belief. For conservatism this would imply that the belief can only be justified if it is caused by itself, which is impossible. However, this objection is based on the assumption that a belief can only be justified on the basis of a reason, and it is exactly this assumption that is challenged by conservatism. Hence, this objection does not hold.

The “Lefty-Righty” objection states that there is equally good evidence that one of two suspects, Lefty and Righty, committed a crime. If a detective came upon the evidence about Lefty first, she would believe Lefty was the criminal and, based on conservatism, she would be justified in maintaining this belief even if she came across equally good evidence that Righty did it. In essence this objection is the same as the number of grains of sand objection, the only difference being the temporal aspect. However, criterion 4 would still cover this example and hence, a plausible version of conservatism will not lead to such results.

The “two scientists” objection starts with two hypotheses, H1 and H2, explaining the same data equally well. They are believed by two different scientists: H1 by S1, and H2 by S2. At some point, S2 stops believing H2 and starts believing H1. According to this objection, S1 would be justified in believing H1, but S2 would not, because S2 was justified in continuing to believe H2. Since S1 and S2 have exactly the same data, this is a highly counterintuitive result. Yet this not what conservatism entails, for holding the belief is a necessary condition for its justification and in the example, S2 stops believing H2 and therefore, in conservatism, is no longer justified in holding on to H2. Although the objection fails, it does point out that conservatism has only limited uses: it cannot give guidance on what beliefs we should form, only under what conditions we are allowed to maintain them.

The “conversion” objection is the idea that a proposition that was not justified to believe becomes justified as soon as one in fact believes it—the epistemic status of a proposition is wrongly changed by being believed. In this case, conservatism can be defended by arguing that the

defeat condition can deal with cases in which one has reason to think that a belief was unjustifiably formed. Moreover, one could also simply accept the situation and say that believing a proposition does change something in the epistemic situation if one assumes that belief formation has a minimal trustworthiness. In any case, the objection does not seem to be fatal for conservatism. In the discussion of this objection, it did become clear that defeaters must be effective and hence the following criterion is formulated:

Criterion 7: avoiding overly liberal defeaters

A plausible principle of justification avoids overly liberal defeaters. This means that a version of conservatism that relies on a defeat condition that is satisfied for every belief a person has, is implausible.

The “extra boost” objection says that in conservatism, a proposition receives an additional boost of confidence because it is believed. For example, if one has evidence for a proposition that gives a level of confidence of 0.4, then simply believing the proposition could increase the level of confidence to 0.6. However, this objection misunderstands the nature of conservatism because it is the mere fact that one holds a belief that justifies its maintenance—its justification is independent of any degree of evidence in favour of a belief and hence confidence does not increase. Therefore, the objection does not hold. The discussion does point to the issue of evidence-sensitivity. I think conservatism can deal with this via the defeat condition, but in any case, it warrants the formulation of an additional criterion:

Criterion 8: avoiding evidential ignorance

In a plausible principle of justification, evidence related to a belief is not ignored—evidence has a function in the principle.

The “partiality” objection says that conservatism arbitrarily favours a person’s own beliefs over those of other people because only the belief a person herself holds are justified. However, if we take conservatism

as a principle of belief maintenance (as indeed I do), then some form of partiality—or rather, self-other asymmetry—is unavoidable because in order to maintain a belief, a person of course must first actually hold that belief. Hence it is impossible to have justification of belief maintenance for a belief one does not in fact already hold—the belief that is justified to maintain for S is S’s belief alone. However, this necessarily applies to all principles of justification for belief maintenance and hence it is not an argument against the plausibility of conservatism.

The “unwarranted assertion” objection states that conservatism leads to implausible assertions such as these: “I believe that P and that is part of my justification for continuing to believe it.” However, this objection simply seems to mischaracterise conservatism. A better assertion on the basis of conservatism would be the following: “I believe that P and I have no reason to doubt it, so I am justified in continuing to believe that P.” This assertion is not obviously unwarranted. Hence, this objection does not hold either.

Finally, the “over-permissiveness” objection states that in conservatism, every belief is *prima facie* justified and that this makes justification valueless, since it does not help to identify justified and unjustified beliefs. However, the defeat condition can differentiate between justified and unjustified beliefs and there is no reason to think that a defeat condition is necessarily too permissive. Hence this objection does not hold.

Chapter 6: McCain’s Conservatism

The discussion on conservatism has continued since many of these objections have been published. In recent years Kevin McCain has developed what he calls a “properly formulated epistemic conservatism” (PEC), which he argues is plausible:

PEC:

If S believes that P and P is not incoherent, then S is justified in retaining the belief that P and S remains justified in believing that P so long as P is not defeated for S.

Defeat Condition 1 (DC1):

If S has better reasons for believing that not-P than S's reasons for believing that P, then S is no longer justified in believing that P.

Defeat Condition 2 (DC2):

If S has reasons for believing that not-P which are as good as S's reasons for believing that P and the belief that not-P coheres equally as well or better than the belief that P does with S's other beliefs, then S is no longer justified in believing that P.

PEC satisfies criterion 1 and 2. However, the way in which it satisfies criterion 3—avoiding arbitrariness—is problematic. In PEC it is not the defeat conditions that explain the difference between a belief being justified or unjustified. If we look closer at the defeat conditions a belief can only be justified if there is a reason for P that is better than the reasons for not-P or if P coheres better with the rest of S's belief than not-P does. However, this means that belief is only justified if there is a relatively good reason for P or if it coheres relatively well with S's other beliefs. This goes against the core claim of conservatism that mere belief is justified in the absence of reasons against it. Instead, justification on PEC originates from inferentialist and coherentist principles. PEC does satisfy criteria 4 to 8, and hence is a plausible principle of justification. However, this is achieved at the expense of no longer being a version of epistemic conservatism. Hence, PEC cannot deliver on the promise of providing a plausible version of conservatism.

Chapter 7: A Plausible Version of Epistemic Conservatism

I argue that a plausible version of epistemic conservatism can be developed if the defeat condition is understood in terms of reasonable doubt. The first step is to focus on propositional doubt. I formulated this as follows:

Propositional doubt

S doubts that P, if and only if (i) S does not believe that P, (ii) even if S has some confidence in P, and (iii) S has at least some confidence in not-P.

The next step is to argue that such doubt should only play a role if it is reasonable—i.e., based on a reason—which I express as follows:

Reasonable doubt

S ought to doubt that P, if and only if S can doubt that P because S has access to a sufficient reason for not-P.

I argue that reasonable doubt is well suited to figure in the defeat condition of epistemic conservatism because the fact that one ought to doubt that P contradicts with the permission that S has to continue to believe that P on the basis of the prima facie justification for P. In my proposal, it is the presence of a reason that settles this contradiction. Moreover, this proposal expresses the modest claim to justification that is associated with conservatism, since prima facie justification can be defeated if there is a reason that increases the level of confidence in not-P, without it being so high that S believes that not-P.

This also points to another important issue, namely that different responses to a defeater can be appropriate. One can have a reason such that one should believe that not-P, but also such that one should suspend judgment regarding P or not-P. I argue that one can also have a reason such that one should neither suspend judgment, nor believe that not-P, but instead should be in doubt about P, which I define as follows:

Being in doubt about P

S is in doubt about P, if and only if (i) S does not believe that P; (ii) S has some confidence in P; (iii) S does not believe that not-P; (iv) S has some confidence in not-P; and (v) S's confidence in P and not-P is not balanced.

On the basis of these considerations, I propose the no-doubt account of epistemic conservatism (NDAC):

NDAC: *If S believes that P, then S is justified in continuing to believe that P, unless S ought to doubt that P.*

Defeat response 1: if S's reason to doubt that P is such that the confidence in not-P is sufficiently high to consider it a belief that not-P, then S should believe that not-P.

Defeat response 2: if S's reason to doubt that P is such that S's confidence in P is the same as S's confidence in not-P, then S should suspend judgment regarding P and not-P.

Defeat response 3: if S's reason to doubt that P is such that S's confidence in P is not the same as S's confidence in not-P, nor sufficiently high to consider it a belief that not-P, then S should be in doubt about P.

I also argue that one can expand upon NDAC with the use of degrees of belief and doubt leading to a version of conservatism I call graded NDAC. In this version, an additional defeat response is present: a degree of doubt that is weaker than the degree of belief can “downgrade” the belief to a lower degree. The added value of this is that it seems to align even better with the phenomenology of the effect of doubt on belief. However, one needs to make a number of assumptions regarding degrees of belief that are controversial, such as that prima facie justification for a degree of belief also encapsulates prima facie justification for lower degrees of that same belief. However, it is not necessary to accept the graded version of NDAC in order to deem NDAC plausible. In my evaluation, I show that NDAC is plausible because it satisfies all criteria (1 to 8) without other, non-conservative principles doing the actual justifying work.

I further argue that a plausible version of epistemic conservatism, such as NDAC, can be developed into a radically weak version of foundationalism—the view that there are certain justified beliefs that can be used as “foundations” from which we can infer all other justified beliefs. Since I have argued that conservatism must be understood as a principle of justified belief maintenance, one might argue that conservatism itself

is not enough to provide foundational beliefs. However, if one assumes that our belief-forming processes are minimally trustworthy, then it is possible to use beliefs that are justified on the basis of conservatism as foundational beliefs. With the term “minimally trustworthy belief formation” I mean that it is unlikely that all of our beliefs are false, and hence we can assume that at least some are true. Moreover, it seems likely that a defeater can get rid of false beliefs, since this is how we usually use defeating arguments: it shows that something is false. If one has found a good defeat condition, it seems likely that a significant number of false beliefs will be defeated. This means that even though we start with a set of beliefs that are more false than true, the defeat condition will remove a sufficient number of the false beliefs such that we end up with more true than false beliefs, which can subsequently function as foundations for other beliefs.

Chapter 8: Amongst Family: Phenomenal Conservatism, Dogmatism, and Credulism

There are a number of positions in philosophy that bear a family resemblance to epistemic conservatism. I aim to highlight the differences and similarities, and show that the discussion on the plausibility of epistemic conservatism is also of relevance to those views. Sometimes phenomenal conservatism (PC)—the view that a belief that *P* is justified for *S* if it seems that *P* for *S*, in the absence of defeaters—is considered the more plausible alternative to epistemic conservatism. However, a crucial difference is that PC is a principle of justified belief formation and not (only) of justified belief maintenance. Interestingly, it seems that many objections to epistemic conservatism can also be levied against PC and vice versa. Examples in which highly counterintuitive beliefs play a crucial role, such as an even number of grains of sand on the beach, can easily be changed into examples that appear highly counterintuitive, such as that it seems to someone that the number of stars in the universe is even. Moreover, discussions on defeat conditions are of crucial importance in both views.

Dogmatism, a view espoused by Jim Pryor, says that justification is sometimes immediate and underminable (being open to defeaters). Moreover, Pryor argues that an even more inclusive view is credulism, which says that one can have a belief that is underminable (but not necessarily immediate) and still justified, even if one was not previously required to rule out the potential underminer. Pryor argues that many views in epistemology actually assume credulism and, to some extent, dogmatism. I argue that epistemic conservatism is at least credulist and might be considered dogmatist as well. This is relevant since objections against epistemic conservatism might instead sometimes be objections to credulism. In that case, the objections would not make epistemic conservatism worse off than many other views in epistemology that rely on credulism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I argue that many objections against epistemic conservatism started with the wrong assumptions and hence were not problematic in the first place. The objections that at first sight seem to undermine conservatism were translated into criteria for the plausibility of a principle of justification. On the basis of the eight criteria for the plausibility of a principle of epistemic justification outlined above, I conclude that my proposed version of epistemic conservatism is plausible.

Nederlandse Samenvatting

Inleiding

We hebben veel overtuigingen, maar we kunnen vaak niet onmiddellijk voldoende ondersteunend bewijs voor deze overtuigingen laten zien. Vaak kunnen we ook geen betrouwbare bron aanwijzen van waaruit die overtuigingen voortkomen. Neem bijvoorbeeld overtuigingen zoals dat ik wakker ben, dat ik van koffie houd of dat filosoferen niet verboden is. Desalniettemin houden we vast aan veel van dit soort overtuigingen zonder dat we onszelf hierdoor onredelijk vinden.

Epistemisch conservatisme verklaart waarom we in zo'n geval inderdaad vaak niet onredelijk zijn. Dit is een principe dat zegt dat als een persoon, S, daadwerkelijk overtuigd is van een propositie, P, S dan epistemisch gerechtvaardigd is om vast te houden aan de overtuiging P, tenzij er iets is dat deze rechtvaardiging ontkracht. Veel filosofen vinden dat epistemisch conservatisme implausibel is. In deze dissertatie heb ik bezwaren tegen epistemisch conservatisme beoordeeld en vervolgens heb ik daaruit acht criteria voor een plausibel epistemisch rechtvaardigingsprincipe gedestilleerd. Bovendien heb ik verschillende versies van conservatisme geëvalueerd op basis van deze criteria en concludeer ik dat er vooralsnog geen plausibele versie van conservatisme bestaat. Daarom kom ik met mijn eigen voorstel voor een plausibele versie van conservatisme, waarin twijfel een centrale rol speelt.

Hoofdstuk 1: Een Eerste Verdediging van Epistemisch Conservatisme

Epistemisch conservatisme is interessant omdat het een verklaring geeft voor de intuïtie dat het onredelijk lijkt om te twijfelen aan veel van onze overtuigingen tenzij we daar een bijzondere reden voor hebben. Conservatisme verklaart ook waarom overtuigingen vanuit ons geheugen en overtuigingen waarvoor we het bewijs verloren hebben nog steeds gerechtvaardigd zijn. Het is namelijk beter dan de alternatieve verklaringen: evidentialisme en preservationisme. De evidentialist moet zijn toevlucht zoeken tot problematisch tweede-orde bewijs of geheu-

genervaring, terwijl de preservationist een problematische verbinding met niet-toegankelijke feiten uit het verleden nodig heeft. Een ander veel genoemd voordeel van conservatisme is cognitieve efficiëntie: we gebruiken in potentie veel minder epistemische hulpbronnen om een overtuiging gerechtvaardigd te laten zijn. Ten slotte leidt de ontkenning van conservatisme tot "epistemisch revisionisme". Dat houdt in dat we elke overtuiging die we hebben op elk moment zouden moeten betwijfelen, tenzij we iets hebben wat op dat moment rechtvaardigt dat we die overtuiging behouden. Dit lijkt implausibel en cognitief extreem veeleisend. In het licht van deze redenen is serieuze filosofische aandacht voor epistemisch conservatisme vereist.

Een aantal analytische onderscheiden zijn cruciaal voor de analyse en evaluatie van epistemisch conservatisme. Met name het onderscheid tussen het verkrijgen en behouden van een overtuiging is van belang. Ik betoog dat epistemisch conservatisme een rechtvaardigingsprincipe is van het behouden van overtuigingen, maar niet van het verkrijgen daarvan. Dit betekent dat epistemisch conservatisme niet stelt dat het feit dat een persoon, S, die overtuiging P heeft gerechtvaardigd is in het verkrijgen van die overtuiging, maar dat, gegeven het feit dat S gelooft in P, S gerechtvaardigd is om te blijven geloven in P, tenzij deze rechtvaardiging ontkracht wordt. Het is bijvoorbeeld redelijk om te blijven geloven dat de aarde rond de zon draait, tenzij we iets ontdekken wat dat ontkracht. Een ander belangrijk onderscheid is dat tussen rechtvaardiging in eerste instantie (prima facie) en alles overwegende (ultima facie). Volgens conservatisme is elke overtuiging die S daadwerkelijk heeft prima facie gerechtvaardigd en het is deze vorm van rechtvaardiging die ontkracht kan worden. Andere relevante onderscheiden zijn die tussen normatieve en descriptieve rechtvaardiging, internalistische en externalistische rechtvaardiging, rechtvaardiging als activiteit of als status, propositionele en doxastische rechtvaardiging, en occurrente en dispositionele rechtvaardiging.

Hoofdstuk 2: Een Klassiek Probleem

Filosofen uit de klassieke oudheid, zoals Sextus Empiricus, beschreven een epistemisch probleem in epistemologie wat bekend is geworden als Agrippa's trilemma. Het trilemma ontstaat wanneer men aanneemt dat een overtuiging alleen gerechtvaardigd kan zijn als het afgeleid is van een andere overtuiging die zelf gerechtvaardigd is. De vraag is dan: waarom is deze laatste overtuiging zelf gerechtvaardigd? Het idee is dat gegeven het trilemma, kennis –of in ons geval epistemische rechtvaardiging– onmogelijk te verkrijgen is en dat we daarom epistemische sceptici moeten zijn. Oftewel dat de niet kunnen zeggen dat we iets kunnen weten of redelijkerwijs kunnen geloven.

Gegeven bovenstaande aanname zijn er drie mogelijke scenario's: 1) men moet steeds nieuwe gerechtvaardigde overtuigingen toevoegen aan een keten van afgeleide overtuigingen (oftewel een oneindige regressie van afgeleide overtuigingen); 2) een overtuiging is afgeleid van een andere overtuiging, die uiteindelijk afgeleid is van de originele overtuiging (oftewel een cirkelredenering); of 3) een overtuiging is afgeleid van een overtuiging die zelf niet is afgeleid van een andere overtuiging (oftewel het rechtvaardigingsproces stopt willekeurig).

Hoewel de aannames en daarmee de uitkomsten van het trilemma kunnen worden betwist, wijst het desalniettemin op een aantal fundamentele criteria voor een plausibel rechtvaardigingsprincipe. Ik heb deze criteria als volgt uiteengezet:

Criterium 1: vermijden van oneindige regressie

Een plausibel rechtvaardigingsprincipe vereist niet dat een persoon S een oneindig aantal proposities gelooft zodat de overtuiging P gerechtvaardigd is voor S .

Criterium 2: vermijden van circulariteit

Een plausibel rechtvaardigingsprincipe vermijdt circulariteit, waarbij een overtuiging P niet gerechtvaardigd is voortkomt uit een keten van redenen die gegrond is op de overtuiging P zelf.

criterium 3: vermijden van willekeur

Een plausibel rechtvaardigingsprincipe kan het verschil tussen gerechtvaardigde en ongerechtvaardigde overtuigingen verklaren.

Als een versie van conservatisme niet aan bovenstaande criteria kan voldoen is het een implausibel principe.

Hoofdstuk 3: het Begin van Conservatisme: Chisholm en Foley

Roderick Chisholm wordt beschouwd als de eerste filosoof die een versie van epistemisch conservatisme formuleerde (hoewel hij het niet zo noemde). Het conservatisme van Chisholm (1982) bestaat uit twee principes op basis waarvan een overtuiging respectievelijk twee gradaties van rechtvaardiging kan verkrijgen. Het eerste principe, C1, zegt dat als een overtuiging niet expliciet wordt tegengesproken door een andere overtuiging die een persoon heeft, het een vermoeden in zijn voordeel heeft –dit is de laagste gradatie van rechtvaardiging in Chisholm's opzet. Het tweede principe, C2, zegt dat een overtuiging acceptabel is –een iets hogere gradatie van rechtvaardiging– als het niet wordt weerlegd door de set van overtuigingen van een persoon die een vermoeden in hun voordeel hebben.

Richard Foley (1983) is kritisch over epistemisch conservatisme – in het bijzonder over de versie van Chisholm– en beschouwt het als implausibel. Zijn hoofdargument is dat conservatisme leidt tot de ad ignorantiam drogreden –het idee dat de afwezigheid van bewijs voor een propositie de tegenovergestelde propositie kan rechtvaardigen. Volgens Foley impliceert conservatisme dat de overtuiging dat er een oneven aantal korrels zand op het strand is gerechtvaardigd is vanwege het feit dat er geen bewijs is dat er een even aantal korrels zand op het strand is. Foley analyseert het probleem in termen van afwezigheid van bewijs, maar dit neemt impliciet aan dat bewijs een noodzakelijke voorwaarde voor rechtvaardiging is. Dat is nu precies de aanname die het conservatisme probeert te weerleggen. In plaats daarvan analyseer ik ad ignorantiam drogreden in termen van het wel of niet opschorten van een oordeel over

de waarheid van een propositie: de echte vraag is of conservatisme leidt tot het willekeurig opschorten of geven van zo'n oordeel. Het bezwaar van Foley kan als volgt worden omgezet in een criterium:

Criterium 4: vermijden van de *ad ignorantiam* drogreden

*Een plausibel rechtvaardigingsprincipe vermijdt willekeur als gevolg van de *ad ignorantiam* drogreden. Dit betekent dat het principe het verschil verklaart tussen het geven en het opschorten van een oordeel.*

Chisholm's conservatisme voldoet aan criterium 1 en 2. C1 voldoet echter niet aan criterium 3, omdat het niet echt het verschil verklaart tussen een gerechtvaardigde en ongerechtvaardigde overtuiging. In dit principe kan een overtuiging, B1, worden verslagen als het in tegenspraak is met een andere overtuiging, B2, maar het principe zegt niet waarom de prima facie rechtvaardiging voor B1 moet worden verslagen door B2, in plaats van andersom.

Een mogelijke oplossing is dat men zowel B1 als B2 moet overwegen om de prima facie rechtvaardiging van elkaar te ontcrachten. Dit is echter ongeloofwaardig gezien het tweede principe van Chisholm. Dat zegt dat weerlegend bewijs het verschil verklaart tussen een overtuiging die gerechtvaardigd of ongerechtvaardigd is (qua acceptabel zijn): als B2 wordt weerlegd door bewijs en B1 niet, dan zou B1 acceptabel zijn, maar B2 niet. Dit zou de contra-intuïtieve situatie creëren waarin een overtuiging die niet expliciet wordt tegengesproken of waarvoor geen weerlegend bewijs is, dezelfde epistemische status heeft –namelijk acceptabel zijn– als een overtuiging die expliciet wordt tegengesproken, maar waarvoor geen weerlegend bewijs is. Deze situatie is niet verenigbaar met Chisholm's begrip van de hiërarchie van rechtvaardiging.

Een andere mogelijke oplossing is om sommige overtuigingen te bevoordelen, zodat wanneer een andere overtuiging in tegenspraak is met dat wat bevoorrecht is, de rechtvaardiging van de andere overtuiging wordt ontcracht en niet de bevoorrechte overtuiging. Zo'n bevoorrechte overtuiging is ofwel feilbaar of onfeilbaar. Als de overtuiging feilbaar is, kan, op basis van C1, de rechtvaardiging worden ontcracht op basis

van een overtuiging die zelf weerlegd kan worden door bewijs (het is immers feilbaar). Dat betekent dat een overtuiging volgens C1 ongerechtvaardigd is op basis van een overtuiging die zelf ongerechtvaardigd is op basis van C2, dat is tegenstrijdig. Daarom moeten dergelijke struikelblokken onfeilbaar zijn, oftewel deze overtuigingen moeten zelf-evident of logisch noodzakelijke overtuigingen zijn. Hierdoor zullen er relatief weinig overtuigingen zijn die door dit soort struikelblokken zullen worden tegengesproken. Dat betekent dat op basis van Chisholm's eerste principe, C1, de meeste overtuigingen, waaronder overtuigingen die elkaar tegenspreken, een vermoeden in hun voordeel hebben wat problematisch is. Hetzelfde dilemma geldt voor het tweede principe, C2. Het conservatisme van Chisholm voldoet dus niet aan criterium 3.

Bovendien voldoet Chisholm's conservatisme niet aan criterium 4, omdat zijn principes het niet mogelijk maken om het oordeel helemaal op te schorten. Daarom is Chisholm's conservatisme implausibel.

De evaluatie van Chisholm's conservatisme leidt ook tot de vraag of conservatisme epistemisch interessante resultaten kan opleveren. De zorg is dat dit niet het geval is en dat conservatisme daarom implausibel is. Het volgende criterium verwoordt deze zorg:

Criterium 5: vermijden dat het oninteressant wordt

Een plausibel rechtvaardigingsprincipe levert epistemisch interessante resultaten op. Dit betekent dat het een rechtvaardiging van een zodanige aard en mate produceert dat het voldoende bijdraagt aan het bereiken van een epistemisch doel.

Hoofdstuk 4: Hogere-orde Conservatisme

Jonathan Kvanvig (1989) heeft betoogd dat de problemen van epistemisch conservatisme voortkomen uit de focus op eerste-orde overtuigingen en eerste-orde ontkrachters. Hij geeft twee tegenvoorbeelden voor dit eerste-orde conservatisme. De eerste is dat een persoon, Joe, kan geloven dat God bestaat en tegelijkertijd kan geloven dat er goede redenen zijn tegen deze overtuiging, waardoor hij zijn eigen overtuiging irrationeel vindt. In eerste-orde conservatisme zou Joe's overtuiging

gerechtvaardigd zijn, ook al is dit zeer tegen-intuïtief. Kvanvig betoogt dat eerste-orde conservatisme niet kan worden gered door simpelweg een ontkrachtingsvoorwaarde van een hogere orde toe te voegen. Als Joe er bijvoorbeeld van overtuigd is dat zijn overtuiging dat God bestaat irrationeel is, dan is de rechtvaardiging voor zijn overtuiging dat God bestaat ontkracht. Dit wordt aangetoond door zijn tweede tegenvoorbeeld waarin een ander persoon, Jack, gelooft dat het noodlot de aarde op een bepaald moment in de toekomst zal treffen, maar ook gelooft dat hij geen enkele reden heeft om te geloven dat dit zo is. Deze overtuiging is ook gerechtvaardigd in het conservatisme, zelfs als er een ontkrachtingsvoorwaarde van een hogere orde wordt toegevoegd.

Toch kan conservatisme worden gered volgens Kvanvig. Hij betoogt dat conservatisme plausibel is als we het zien als een principe over hogere-orde overtuigingen en hogere-orde ontkrachtende overtuigingen. De essentie van hogere-orde conservatisme is dat de aanwezigheid van hogere-orde overtuigingen en de afwezigheid van een hogere-orde ontkrachtende overtuigingen cruciaal is voor rechtvaardiging. Kvanvig's versie vereist dat een persoon een tweede-orde overtuiging heeft dat zijn eerste-orde overtuiging waar gebleken is, dat hij geen derde-orde overtuiging heeft die laat zien dat zijn tweede-orde overtuiging niet het geval is.

Een probleem voor de versie van Kvanvig is de afwezigheid van verdere hogere-orde ontkrachtende overtuigingen. Het lijkt willekeurig dat de loutere afwezigheid van een tweede-orde ontkrachtende overtuigingen in het tegenvoorbeeld van Jack problematisch is, maar de loutere afwezigheid van een derde-orde ontkrachtende overtuigingen dat niet is. Als we Kvanvig's denkwijze volgen zou er een extra hogere-orde overtuiging moeten worden toegevoegd, zonder dat die overtuiging zelf slachtoffer wordt van een hogere-orde ontkrachtende overtuiging. Maar nogmaals, de loutere afwezigheid van een hogere-orde ontkrachtende overtuiging is problematisch en daarom moeten er meer hogere-orde overtuigingen en hogere-orde ontkrachtingsvoorwaarde worden toegevoegd en is een oneindige regressie van hogere-orde overtuigingen en hogere-orde ontkrachtingsvoorwaarden begonnen. Dit betekent dat de versie van

Kvanvig niet voldoet aan criterium 1 of, als men simpelweg stopt met het toevoegen van extra hogere-orde-overtuigingen en hogere-orde ontkrachtingsvoorwaarden, kan men uiteindelijk het verschil tussen een gerechtvaardigde en ongerechtvaardigde overtuiging niet verklaren, en daarom wordt niet aan criterium 3 voldaan.

Een poging om hogere-orde conservatisme uit dit dilemma te redden is te stellen dat er iets is dat de oneindige regressie stopt. Dit kan bijvoorbeeld een bepaalde ervaring zijn, bijvoorbeeld de ervaring van reflectie, een betrouwbaar proces van denken over overtuigingen, of het beschouwen van hogere-orde overtuigingen als epistemisch “bevoorrecht”. Maar al dit soort oplossingen werkt alleen als de volgende onwaarschijnlijke aanname wordt gemaakt: dat hogere-orde-overtuigingen fundamenteel verschillen van eerste-orde-overtuigingen qua epistemische status. Er is geen reden om aan te nemen dat er zo’n epistemisch relevant verschil bestaat. Er is dus geen uitweg uit het dilemma tussen het voldoen aan criterium 1 of 3.

Wat betreft criterium 4 lijkt het hogere-orde conservatisme niet in de problemen te komen: de formulering kan zo worden aangepast dat het mogelijk is om het oordeel over een propositie op te schorten. Het is echter de vraag of dit epistemisch interessante resultaten kan opleveren (criterium 5). Er lijkt geen epistemische doel te zijn waarbij het hogere-orde conservatisme echt helpt. Het lijkt niet dat een overtuiging een grotere kans is om waar, begrepen of consistent te zijn puur omdat er een hogere-orde overtuiging is of een hogere-orde ontkrachter ontbreekt. Aan criterium 5 wordt dus niet voldaan. Aangezien hogere-orde conservatisme niet voldoet aan een aantal criteria voor een plausibel rechtvaardigingsprincipe, concludeer ik dat het implausibel is.

Hoofdstuk 5: Meer Bezwaren tegen het Conservatisme

Sinds de publicaties van Chisholm, Foley en Kvanvig zijn er veel meer bezwaren tegen conservatisme naar voren gebracht. Voor de gegronde bezwaren heb ik aanvullende criteria geformuleerd voor de plausibiliteit van een rechtvaardigingsprincipe.

Het eerste bezwaar is het 'kop-of-munt-bezwaar'. Stel je voor dat een persoon een munt opgooit en dan, zonder het resultaat te zien, de overtuiging vormt dat de munt met "kop" zichtbaar landt. Volgens dit bezwaar moet het conservatisme wel zeggen dat deze persoon gerechtvaardigd is om te geloven dat het "kop" is, terwijl dat overduidelijk onredelijk is om te geloven. Vergelijkbaar is het 'Lefty-Righty-bezwaar' waarin ervan uit wordt gegaan dat er even goed bewijs is dat een van de twee verdachten, Lefty en Righty, een misdrijf heeft gepleegd. Als een rechercheur als eerste het bewijsmateriaal over Lefty tegen zou komen, zou ze geloven dat Lefty de crimineel was en, op basis van conservatisme, zou ze gerechtvaardigd zijn om deze overtuiging te handhaven, zelfs als ze even goed bewijs tegenkwam dat Righty het deed. Beide bezwaren zijn in essentie hetzelfde als het bezwaar van Foley over het even of oneven aantal zandkorrels op het strand en daarom is het criterium dat ik uit dat bezwaar heb ontwikkeld, criterium 4, ook hier van toepassing.

Daarnaast is het belangrijk te onthouden dat conservatisme over de rechtvaardiging gaat van het behoud van overtuigingen en niet de vorming ervan. Als dat laatste het geval zou zijn, zouden deze voorbeelden wellicht wel problematisch zijn. Daarom kan een ander criterium voor een plausibel rechtvaardigingsprincipe worden afgeleid:

Criterium 6: vermijden van achterwaarts redeneren

Een plausibel rechtvaardigingsprincipe gebruikt het feit dat iemand al een overtuiging heeft niet als reden om die overtuiging te vormen.

Een ander bezwaar is dat conservatisme niet verenigbaar is met de causale uitleg van de zogenaamde 'baseringsrelatie': het idee dat een overtuiging gerechtvaardigd is door een reden als de reden ook de overtuiging heeft veroorzaakt. Voor conservatisme zou dit betekenen dat de overtuiging alleen kan worden gerechtvaardigd als het door zichzelf wordt veroorzaakt, wat onmogelijk is. Dit bezwaar is echter gebaseerd op de veronderstelling dat een overtuiging alleen op grond van een reden kan worden gerechtvaardigd, en het is precies deze veronderstelling die door het conservatisme wordt betwist. Dit bezwaar gaat dus niet op.

Het ‘twee-wetenschappers-bezwaar’ begint met twee hypothesen, H1 en H2, die dezelfde gegevens even goed verklaren. De hypothesen worden geloofd door twee verschillende wetenschappers: H1 door S1 en H2 door S2. Op een gegeven moment stopt S2 met het geloven van H2 en begint te geloven in H1. Volgens dit bezwaar zou S1 gerechtvaardigd zijn om H1 te geloven, maar S2 niet, omdat S2 alleen gerechtvaardigd was om H2 te blijven geloven. Aangezien S1 en S2 exact dezelfde gegevens hebben, is dit een zeer contra-intuïtief resultaat. Maar conservatisme leidt niet tot dit resultaat want het daadwerkelijke hebben van een overtuiging is een noodzakelijke voorwaarde voor de rechtvaardiging ervan en in het voorbeeld houdt S2 op met het geloven van H2 en is het daarom, volgens het conservatisme, niet langer gerechtvaardigd om vast te houden aan H2. Hoewel het bezwaar faalt, wijst het er wel op dat conservatisme slechts een beperkte toepassing heeft: het kan geen richtlijn geven over welke overtuigingen we moeten vormen, alleen onder welke voorwaarden we ze mogen handhaven.

Het ‘veranderingsbezwaar’ is het idee dat een propositie die men niet gerechtvaardigd was om te geloven, gerechtvaardigd wordt zodra men deze in feite gelooft –in andere woorden, de epistemische status van een propositie wordt ten onrechte veranderd doordat hij wordt geloofd. In dit geval kan conservatisme worden verdedigd door te stellen dat de ontkrachtingsconditie kan omgaan met gevallen waarin men reden heeft om te denken dat een overtuiging ongerechtvaardigd is gevormd. Bovendien zou je de situatie ook gewoon kunnen accepteren en zeggen dat het geloven van een propositie wel degelijk iets verandert in de epistemische situatie als je ervan uitgaat dat het proces van het vormen van een overtuiging een minimale betrouwbaarheid heeft. Het bezwaar lijkt in ieder geval niet fataal voor het conservatisme. Bij de bespreking van dit bezwaar is wel duidelijk geworden dat ontkrachters effectief moeten zijn en daarom heb ik het volgende criterium geformuleerd:

Criterium 7: vermijden van al te liberale ontkrachters

Een plausibel rechtvaardigingsprincipe vermijdt al te liberale ontkrachters. Dit betekent dat een versie van conservatisme die vertrouwt op een

ontkrachtingsvoorwaarde die op elke overtuiging die een persoon heeft van toepassing is, ongelofwaardig is.

Het 'extra-boost-bezwaar' zegt dat het conservatisme ertoe leidt dat een propositie een extra versterking van betrouwbaarheid krijgt omdat het wordt geloofd. Als iemand bijvoorbeeld bewijs heeft voor een propositie die een betrouwbaarheidsniveau van 0,4 geeft, dan zou dit kunnen toenemen tot 0,6 simpelweg door het te geloven. Dit bezwaar begrijpt echter de aard van conservatisme verkeerd, omdat het loutere feit dat iemand een overtuiging heeft de handhaving van de overtuiging rechtvaardigt –de rechtvaardiging is onafhankelijk van enige mate van bewijs voor een overtuiging en daarom neemt het betrouwbaarheidsniveau niet toe. Het bezwaar gaat daarom niet op, maar het is wel duidelijk dat er een vraag is in hoeverre een rechtvaardigingsprincipe gevoelig is voor bewijs. Ik denk dat conservatisme dit kan oplossen via de ontkrachtingsconditie, maar het in ieder geval belangrijk om een extra criterium te formuleren:

Criterion 8: vermijden van onwetendheid over bewijs

In een plausibel rechtvaardigingsprincipe wordt bewijs met betrekking tot een overtuiging niet genegeerd: bewijs heeft een functie in het principe.

Het 'partijdigheidsbezwaar' zegt dat conservatisme op een willekeurige wijze iemands eigen overtuigingen bevoordeelt boven die van andere mensen, omdat alleen de overtuiging die iemand zelf heeft gerechtvaardigd is. Als we echter conservatisme beschouwen als een rechtvaardigingsprincipe voor het behoud van overtuigingen (zoals ik inderdaad doe), dan is een vorm van partijdigheid –of liever, zelf-ander-asymmetrie– onvermijdelijk, want om een overtuiging te behouden, moet een persoon natuurlijk eerst daadwerkelijk die overtuiging hebben. Daarom is het onmogelijk om een rechtvaardiging voor het behouden van een overtuiging te hebben voor een overtuiging die men niet al heeft –alleen de overtuigingen die S heeft kunnen überhaupt gerechtvaardigd zijn om te behouden voor S. Dit geldt echter noodzakelijkerwijs voor alle rechtvaar-

digingsprincipes voor het behouden van overtuiging en is daarom geen argument tegen de aannemelijkheid van conservatisme.

Het 'ongeloofwaardige-bewering-bezwaar' stelt dat conservatisme leidt tot ongelooftwaardige beweringen zoals deze: "ik geloof in P en dat is een deel van mijn rechtvaardiging om erin te blijven geloven." Dit bezwaar lijkt echter gebaseerd te zijn op een karikatuur van conservatisme. Een betere bewering die men op basis van het conservatisme zou kunnen doen is de volgende: "Ik geloof in P en ik heb geen reden om eraan te twijfelen, dus ik ben gerechtigd te blijven geloven in P." Deze bewering is niet overduidelijk ongelooftwaardig. Ook dit bezwaar gaat dus niet op.

Ten slotte stelt het 'te-toegefelijk-bezwaar' dat volgens het conservatisme elke overtuiging gerechtvaardigd is. Dat maakt rechtvaardiging waardeloos omdat het niet helpt om gerechtvaardigde en ongerechtvaardigde overtuigingen te identificeren. De ontkrachtingsvoorwaarde kan echter onderscheid maken tussen gerechtvaardigde en ongerechtvaardigde overtuigingen en er is geen reden om te denken dat een ontkrachtingsvoorwaarde noodzakelijkerwijs te toegefelijk is. Dit bezwaar gaat dus niet op.

Hoofdstuk 6: McCain's Conservatisme

De discussie over conservatisme heeft niet stilgestaan sinds veel van bovenstaande bezwaren zijn gepubliceerd. In de afgelopen jaren heeft Kevin McCain een versie van conservatisme ontwikkeld die hij "goed geformuleerd epistemisch conservatisme" (PEC) noemt, waarvan hij stelt dat het plausibel is:

PEC:

Als S gelooft in P en als P niet onsamenvhangend is, dan is S gerechtvaardigd om de overtuiging P te behouden en S blijft gerechtvaardigd om P te geloven zolang P niet wordt ontkracht voor S.

Ontkrachtingsvoorwaarde 1 (DC1):

Als S betere redenen heeft niet-P te geloven dan de redenen van S om P te geloven, dan is S niet langer gerechtvaardigd om P te geloven.

Ontkrachtingsvoorwaarde 2 (DC2):

Als S redenen heeft om niet-P te geloven die even goed zijn als de redenen van S om P te geloven en de overtuiging niet-P even coherent of meer coherent is met de andere overtuigingen van S dan de overtuiging P is met de andere overtuigingen van S, dan is S niet langer gerechtvaardigd om P te geloven.

PEC voldoet aan criterium 1 en 2. Maar de manier waarop het voldoet aan criterium 3 –het vermijden van willekeur– is problematisch. In PEC zijn het niet de ontkrachtingsvoorwaarden die het verschil verklaren tussen een overtuiging die gerechtvaardigd of ongerechtvaardigd is. Als we de ontkrachtingsvoorwaarden nader bekijken zien we dat een overtuiging alleen kan worden gerechtvaardigd als er een reden voor P is die beter is dan de redenen voor niet-P of als P meer coherent is met de andere overtuigingen van S dan niet-P. Dit betekent echter dat een overtuiging alleen gerechtvaardigd is als er een relatief goede reden is voor P of als deze relatief goed coherent is met de andere overtuigingen van S. Dit druist in tegen de kernclaim van het conservatisme, namelijk dat een loutere overtuiging gerechtvaardigd is als er geen redenen tegen deze overtuiging zijn. In plaats daarvan komt de rechtvaardiging op PEC voort uit inferentialistische en coherentistische principes. PEC voldoet wel aan de criteria 4 t/m 8 en is daarmee een plausibel rechtvaardigingsprincipe. Maar het is dus geen conservatief principe meer en kan zich daarom ook niet op de voordelen daarvan beroepen. Daarom kan PEC de belofte van een plausibele versie van conservatisme niet waarmaken.

Hoofdstuk 7: Naar een Plausibel Epistemisch Conservatisme

Ik beargumenteer dat een plausibele versie van epistemisch conservatisme kan worden ontwikkeld als de ontkrachtingsvoorwaarde wordt

begrepen in termen van redelijke twijfel. De eerste stap is het focussen op propositionele twijfel. Dit heb ik als volgt geformuleerd:

Propositionele twijfel

S betwijfelt P, dan en slechts dan als (i) S niet gelooft in P, (ii) zelfs als S enig vertrouwen heeft in P, en (iii) S tenminste enig vertrouwen heeft in niet-P.

De volgende stap is te beargumenteren dat dergelijke twijfel alleen een rol zou moeten spelen als deze redelijk is –d.w.z. gebaseerd op een reden– die ik als volgt uitdruk:

Gerede twijfel

S zou aan P moeten twijfelen, dan en slechts dan als S kan twijfelen aan P omdat S toegang heeft tot een voldoende reden voor niet-P.

Ik beargumenteer dat redelijke twijfel zeer geschikt is om een rol te spelen in de ontkrachtingsvoorwaarde van epistemisch conservatisme, omdat het feit dat men zou moeten twijfelen aan P in tegenspraak is met de toestemming die S heeft om te blijven geloven in P op basis van de prima facie rechtvaardiging voor P. In mijn voorstel is het de aanwezigheid van een reden die deze tegenstrijdigheid oplost. Bovendien drukt dit voorstel de bescheiden aanspraak op rechtvaardiging uit die wordt geassocieerd met conservatisme, aangezien prima facie rechtvaardiging kan worden ontkracht als er een reden is die het vertrouwen in niet-P verhoogt, zonder dat dit zo hoog is dat het de overtuiging niet-P betreft.

Dit wijst ook op een ander belangrijk punt, namelijk dat verschillende reacties op een ontkrachting passend kunnen zijn. Men kan een reden hebben op basis waarvan men niet-P zou moeten geloven, maar ook zodanig dat men het oordeel over P of niet-P moet opschorten. Ik beargumenteer dat men ook een reden kan hebben om het oordeel niet op te schorten, noch te geloven in niet-P, maar in plaats daarvan in twijfel te zijn over P, die ik als volgt definieer:

In twijfel zijn over P

S twijfelt over P, dan en slechts dan als (i) S niet gelooft in P; (ii) S enig vertrouwen heeft in P; (iii) S niet gelooft in niet-P; (iv) S enig heeft vertrouwen in niet-P; en (v) het vertrouwen van S in P en niet-P is niet in evenwicht is.

Op basis van deze overwegingen stel ik de geen-twijfel versie van epistemisch conservatisme (NDAC) voor:

NDAC: *Als S gelooft in P, dan is S gerechtvaardigd om P te blijven geloven, tenzij S zou moeten twijfelen aan P.*

Ontkrachtingsreactie 1: als de reden van S om aan P te twijfelen zodanig is dat het vertrouwen in niet-P voldoende hoog is om het als een overtuiging niet-P te beschouwen, dan zou S niet-P moeten geloven.

Ontkrachtingsreactie 2: als de reden van S om te twijfelen aan P zodanig is dat het vertrouwen van S in P hetzelfde is als het vertrouwen van S in niet-P, dan moet S het oordeel over P en niet-P opschorten.

Ontkrachtingsreactie 3: als de reden van S om aan P te twijfelen zodanig is dat het vertrouwen van S in P niet hetzelfde is als het vertrouwen van S in niet-P, en ook niet voldoende hoog is om het als een overtuiging niet-P te beschouwen, dan moet S twijfelen aan P.

Ik beargumenteer ook dat men NDAC kan uitbreiden met behulp door overtuigingen en twijfels gradueel te beschouwen. Dit leidt tot een versie van conservatisme die ik graduele NDAC noem. In deze versie is er een extra ontkrachtingsreactie aanwezig: een mate van twijfel die zwakker is dan de mate van geloof kan de overtuiging naar een lagere graad "downgraden". De meerwaarde hiervan is dat het nog beter lijkt aan te sluiten bij hoe we het effect van twijfel op onze overtuigingen vaak omschrijven. Men moet echter een aantal veronderstellingen maken met betrekking tot de mate van geloof die controversieel is, zoals dat prima facie rechtvaardig

diging voor een zekere mate van geloof ook prima facie rechtvaardiging inkapselt voor lagere graden van datzelfde geloof. Het is echter niet nodig om de gegradeerde versie van NDAC te accepteren om NDAC als plausibel te beschouwen. In mijn evaluatie laat ik zien dat NDAC plausibel is omdat het voldoet aan alle criteria (1 tot en met 8) zonder dat andere, niet-conservatieve principes het daadwerkelijke rechtvaardigende werk doen.

Ik beargumenteer verder dat een plausibele versie van epistemisch conservatisme, zoals NDAC, kan worden doorontwikkeld tot een radicaal zwakke versie van funderingsdenken. Funderingsdenken is de opvatting dat er bepaalde gerechtvaardigde overtuigingen zijn die kunnen worden gebruikt als 'fundamenten' waarvan we alle andere gerechtvaardigde overtuigingen kunnen afleiden. Aangezien ik heb betoogd dat conservatisme moet worden begrepen als een rechtvaardigingsprincipe voor het behoud van overtuigingen, zou men kunnen stellen dat conservatisme zelf niet voldoende is om fundamentele overtuigingen te verschaffen. Als men er echter van uitgaat dat onze overtuigingsvormende processen minimaal betrouwbaar zijn, dan is het mogelijk om op basis van conservatisme gerechtvaardigde overtuigingen als fundamentele overtuigingen te gebruiken. Met de term 'minimaal betrouwbare geloofsvorming' bedoel ik dat het onwaarschijnlijk is dat al onze overtuigingen onjuist zijn, en daarom kunnen we aannemen dat er tenminste enkele waar zijn. Bovendien lijkt het waarschijnlijk dat een ontkrachter onware overtuigingen er grotendeels uit kan filteren, aangezien dit is hoe we meestal ontkrachtende argumenten gebruiken: het laat zien dat iets onwaar is. Als iemand een goede ontkrachtingsvoorwaarde heeft gevonden, lijkt het waarschijnlijk dat een aanzienlijk aantal onware overtuigingen zal worden ontkracht. Dit betekent dat, hoewel we beginnen met een set overtuigingen waarvan er meer onwaar dan waar zijn, de ontkrachtingsvoorwaarde een voldoende aantal onware overtuigingen zal verwijderen, zodat we eindigen met meer ware dan onware overtuigingen, die vervolgens kunnen fungeren als basis voor andere overtuigingen.

Hoofdstuk 8: Een Grote Familie: Fenomenaal Conservatisme, Dogmatisme en Credulisme

Er zijn een aantal theorieën in de filosofie die verwant zijn aan epistemisch conservatisme. Soms wordt fenomenaal conservatisme –de opvatting dat een overtuiging dat P gerechtvaardigd is voor S als het voor S lijkt dat P het geval is, in de afwezigheid van ontkrachters– als het meer plausible alternatief voor epistemisch conservatisme beschouwd. Het interessante is dat veel bezwaren tegen epistemisch conservatisme ook tegen fenomenaal conservatisme kunnen worden ingebracht en omgekeerd. Bovendien zijn discussies over ontkrachters in beide visies van cruciaal belang.

Dogmatisme, een visie die Jim Pryor aanhangt, zegt dat rechtvaardiging soms onmiddellijk en ondermijnebaar is, en daarmee openstaat voor ontkrachters. Bovendien stelt Pryor dat er een nog meer omvattende kijk is namelijk credulisme, dat zegt dat men een overtuiging kan hebben die ondermijnebaar is (maar niet noodzakelijk onmiddellijk is) en nog steeds gerechtvaardigd is, zelfs al heeft men niet van tevoren alles gedaan om de mogelijke ondermijning uit te sluiten. Pryor stelt dat veel opvattingen in de epistemologie eigenlijk uitgaan van credulisme en, tot op zekere hoogte, dogmatisme. Ik betoog dat epistemisch conservatisme op zijn minst credulistisch is en ook als dogmatisch kan worden beschouwd. Dit is relevant omdat bezwaren tegen epistemisch conservatisme in plaats daarvan soms bezwaren tegen credulisme kunnen zijn. In dat geval zouden deze bezwaren er niet voor zorgen dat epistemisch conservatisme minder plausibel is dan veel andere epistemische theorieën die ook uitgaan van credulisme.

Conclusie

Tot slot beargumenteer ik dat veel bezwaren tegen epistemisch conservatisme begonnen met de verkeerde veronderstelling en daarom in de eerste plaats niet problematisch waren. De bezwaren die op het eerste gezicht het conservatisme lijken te ondermijnen, werden vertaald in criteria voor de plausibiliteit van een rechtvaardigingsprincipe. Op basis van de acht criteria voor de plausibiliteit van een rechtvaardigingsprincipe,

concludeer ik dat mijn voorgestelde versie van epistemisch conservatisme plausibel is.

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Curriculum Vitae

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EPISTEMIC CONSERVATISM

Evaluation and Defence

Epistemic conservatism is the idea that we are allowed to hold on to our beliefs as long as we don't have any reasons to doubt those beliefs. Different versions of this idea have been formulated and it appears to be an intuitive idea. Still, many philosophers consider epistemic conservatism to be implausible.

In this dissertation I discuss the objections to epistemic conservatism, evaluate the different versions of it, and argue that they are indeed problematic. Instead I present a version of epistemic conservatism that I argue is plausible.

EPISSTEMIC CONCERN-VALUATION DEFERENCE: HOLTOP