

Chapter 2

Epistemic Justification

Our official analysis of the concept of knowledge is as follows:

If person S knows that p, then

- 1) p
- 2) S believes that p
- 3) S is well justified in believing that p

“P” stands for any proposition. Let’s pick a proposition and put it in place of “p.” For any person, if that person knows that pure water under pressure of one atmosphere boils at 90° Celsius, then 1) pure water under pressure of one atmosphere boils at 90° Celsius, 2) that person believes (strongly) that pure water under pressure of one atmosphere boils at 90° Celsius, and 3) that person is well justified in believing that pure water under pressure of one atmosphere boils at 90° Celsius.

Each of the three conditions for knowledge is a necessary condition. That is to say, if any one of them is not met, then S does not know that p. Since it is not true that pure water under pressure of one atmosphere boils at 90° Celsius, no one knows that pure water under pressure of one atmosphere boils at 90° Celsius, even should someone believe strongly that it does and is well justified in so believing.

In the previous chapter we considered the belief condition and the truth condition of our official analysis of the concept of knowledge. In this chapter we will discuss the justification condition.

1) The justification condition

If Sally knows that Victor Hugo wrote *Les Misérables*, then Sally is well justified in believing that Victor Hugo wrote *Les Misérables*. To be well justified in believing something is to have good reasons for believing it, good reasons that bear on the truth of what one believes. Sally doesn’t know that Victor Hugo wrote *Les Misérables* if her belief that Victor Hugo wrote *Les Misérables* is based on a hunch or on a wish or if, despite her evidence in favour of his having written it, Sally also has evidence against Victor Hugo’s having done so. Sally doesn’t know that p if Sally’s belief that p is backed up merely by a hunch or a wish, or if Sally has evidence against p, because in such cases Sally is not well justified in believing that p. Since knowledge requires good justification, Sally doesn’t know that p when Sally lacks good justification for believing that p, even when Sally is right that p.

Why does knowledge require justification? The justification requirement is motivated by our resistance to ascribing knowledge to someone whose true belief rests on little or no evidence, or is held despite contrary evidence. With just little or no evidence, or in the presence of contrary evidence, a person who believes something that’s true has got it right just by accident. Such a person could easily have believed falsely. Knowledge requires justification for we do not know something that we’ve got right just by accident. Knowledge

is an accomplishment.

The concept of justification we have in mind when we discuss the justification condition for knowledge we can call epistemic justification. One is justified epistemically in believing that *p* when the reasons one has for believing that *p* are reasons for thinking that “*p*” is true—that “*p*” accurately describes some aspect of the world. The presence in mind of reasons of that sort, whatever that sort is, speaks to the truth of the proposition.

Epistemic justification is not the only kind of justification. There are as many kinds of justification as there are interests people have or could have. Along with epistemic justification, philosophers are most interested in ethical justification and prudential justification. One might, for instance, be ethically justified in believing something in that believing it meets certain standards of ethics (believing it promotes the good of people generally, say, or believing it enables one to treat others with respect). One might be prudentially justified in believing something in that believing it promotes some of one’s ends or interests. One might, conceivably, be ethically or prudentially justified in believing something independently of whether what one believes is true or false. One might be ethically or prudentially justified in believing something independently of whether one is epistemically justified in believing it. (We will investigate these matters in Part II of this book, the part concerning responsible believing.)

Knowledge requires epistemic justification. When one is not well justified epistemically in believing that Earth has often been visited by intelligent extraterrestrials, one does not know that Earth has often been visited by intelligent extraterrestrials, even if it is true that it has been visited and one believes with all one’s heart that it has. When one is not well justified in believing that Earth has often been visited by extraterrestrials, one does not know that Earth has often been visited by extraterrestrials, even if one is well justified ethically or prudentially in believing that Earth has often been visited by extraterrestrials. The reasons one has for believing some proposition are epistemically justifying when, and only when, they are reasons that bear on the truth of the proposition, rather than on, say, the ethical or prudential soundness of believing it. When one lacks epistemically justifying reasons for believing something, then, whether one’s belief is true is just a matter of luck. It is just a matter of luck from one’s very own perspective, just as catching a baseball while blindfolded would be a matter of luck. But since *knowing something* is an accomplishment, being right about something just by luck isn’t to know it.

That, then, is our defence of the claim that if one knows that *p*, then one is well justified epistemically in believing that *p*.

2) *The concept of epistemic justification*

A person is well justified epistemically in believing that *p*, we said, if and only if that person believes that *p* on reasons that bear on whether “*p*” is true. Justification, then, comes in degrees, as one might have more or fewer reasons for believing that *p*, or better or worse reasons. One might have lots of little reasons for believing that Chuck is in his room (Sally says that Chuck is in his room, one sees the light on in Chuck’s room, and one hears music playing in Chuck’s room), little reasons that add up to a good reason for believing Chuck is in his room. Or one might have one big reason (one is looking through Chuck’s open door directly at Chuck, who is standing in the middle of his room). One might be justified in

believing that Chuck is in his room on the basis of lots of little reasons, even though one also has a reason for believing he isn't there (one remembers Chuck having said he will be going to the library this afternoon). To know something, of course, is to be very well justified in believing it; but one can be better or worse justified in believing something even though one is not well enough justified to know it.

Further, being even well justified in believing that *p* does not ensure that "*p*" is true. Sally's boss, we said in a previous example, drives a red car and parks in a particular spot in the company's parking lot. Sally has never known a red car to be in that spot and the boss not to be in the building, and she has checked on this many times. Suppose that Sally again notices a red car in the boss's parking space and, on basis of noticing this, infers that the boss is in the building. Suppose also that Sally sees the lights on in the boss's office and hears from a co-worker that the boss went into his office five minutes ago. The co-worker adds that she hasn't seen or heard anything that would indicate that the boss has left his office. Sally has nothing but good reasons for thinking that the boss is in the building and no reason not to think so. She is very well justified epistemically in believing that her boss is in the building. And yet, the boss is not in the building. He was in his office for just a few seconds. He left his office quietly, forgetting to turn off the lights. He walked to a nearby coffee shop. Sally's well justified belief that her boss is in the building is false.

Of course, one cannot *often* be well justified in believing something and that something be false. One is not well justified epistemically in believing something except that one's reasons for believing indicate that the proposition one believes is true. Typically, then, when one is well justified epistemically in believing something, that something is true. But it is possible, though it happens only atypically, that one is well justified epistemically in believing something false.

We have made four points. They are: 1) that being justified in believing some proposition is being epistemically justified in believing it only when one's reasons for believing it bear on whether that proposition is true; 2) that epistemic justification comes in degrees; 3) that one can be well justified epistemically in believing something false; 4) that typically when one is well justified epistemically in believing something, one believes it truly. We can take these points as parts of the very concept of epistemic justification, whatever we go on to say about what makes for epistemic justification. Controversy among philosophers enters with the question what is it that bears on whether a proposition is true. This question can be formulated as a question about the conditions under which believing a proposition is epistemically justified. "Sally is epistemically justified in believing that *p* if and only if" –If and only if what?

Philosophers are divided over at least two accounts of epistemic justification, two different accounts of what it is that makes a person epistemically justified in believing a proposition. We will call one of these accounts "the standard account," the other "reliabilism." Each attempts only to specify some necessary conditions for being epistemically justified in believing something. Again, we will set aside the problem of giving a complete account of justification, one that gives sufficient conditions for being justified. We will seek necessary conditions only.

3) *The standard account of being well justified epistemically in believing something*
According to the standard account of epistemic justification,

If Sally is well justified in believing that red wine stains cannot be removed from white cotton blouses, then 1) Sally is *aware* of a (good) *argument* that has as its conclusion the proposition “red wine stains cannot be removed from white cotton blouses” and 2) Sally is unaware of any good argument to the contrary.

To understand this answer to the question in what epistemic justification consists, we need to understand at least three things: what an argument is, what makes a good argument good, and what it is to be aware of an argument.

An argument is a set of at least two propositions, one of which is the conclusion, the rest of which are the premises. The premises are reasons or grounds for thinking that the conclusion is true or, at least, is more likely true than not. The conclusion follows from the premises, meaning that if the premises are true, it is at least more likely than not that the conclusion is true. An argument is good when the person entertaining it accepts all the premises and the premises do, given her epistemic standards, support the conclusion. A good argument is good, then, in virtue of its proceeding from acceptable premises through acceptable inferences to its final conclusion.

What is it for a person to be aware of an argument? A person is aware of an argument when that person can state that argument in words. This isn't to say that a person is aware of an argument only when she can *immediately* state it in words, should she decide to. She may have to collect her thoughts and to reflect on what's in her mind before she finds her words and organizes them into an argument. Of course, sometimes the process of thinking things through and constructing an argument is not the process of *giving a justification* for what one believes, but rather the process of *coming to be justified* in what one believes. Yet there's no way to draw a firm line between being justified right now in believing that p and coming to be justified in believing that p by thinking about it, though many cases will be clearly one and not the other. It's enough, practically and philosophically, just that with time and effort one can produce an argument to which one is committed for one to count as justified epistemically in believing the conclusion of that argument.

To be aware of a good argument for some proposition is to have *some* justification for believing it—but it might not actually be to be justified in believing it. One is not justified in believing some proposition even though one has reason for believing it if one also has reason to believe it false. That the light is on in Chuck's room is some evidence for Sally that Chuck is home; but since Sally has heard Margaret say that Chuck just went out, Sally is not epistemically justified in believing that Chuck is home merely on the evidence she presently has that he is. Indeed, Sally might be epistemically justified in believing that Chuck is not at home despite her evidence that he is, if she has good reason to accept Margaret's testimony. Or Sally might do best simply to withhold judgement.

Usually, then, one is not well justified in believing something, despite having evidence for it, when one has evidence against it. But, if one can explain away that evidence, or if, on reflection, the evidence against it is weak while the evidence for it is strong, one might be epistemically justified in believing it. One cannot be sure of something when one has

contrary evidence, though, even if one is justified in believing it. Responsible believers, of course, at least on one view, believe with a strength proportionate to their all-things-considered judgements; responsible believers will withhold belief when aware of any strong contrary evidence. Sally might be well justified in believing that penguins can fly though Sally is aware of evidence against the truth of the proposition “penguins can fly,” but only if either she can explain away that evidence or in some other way is reasonable to discount it.

To sum up: If Sally is well justified that red wine stains cannot be removed from white cotton blouses, then:

- 1) Sally can state an argument (perhaps only after reflection) to the conclusion that red wine stains cannot be removed from white cotton blouses
- 2) Sally herself accepts the premises of that argument
- 3) the inferences in that argument meet Sally’s standards for preserving truth
- 4) Sally is either unaware of any evidence that red wine stains can be removed from white cotton blouses, or Sally can explain away that negative evidence or that negative evidence is heavily outweighed by Sally’s positive evidence.

“Don’t ask me how I know it, I just know it.” “I know it, but I don’t know how I know it.” On our official account of epistemic justification, remarks such as these are always false. If you don’t have reasons for thinking something true, you do not know that it is true, even if it is true. Moreover, if you cannot give your reasons for thinking it true, then you don’t know that it is true, for that you cannot give reasons indicates that you don’t have reasons to give.

4) *Justification and explanation*

“Why do you believe that the moon is devoid of life?”

Ali: Well, there can be no life where there is no food or accessible water. Since there is no food or accessible water on the moon, nothing can live there. That’s why I believe that the moon is devoid of life.

Bernard: My teachers always told me that the moon is devoid of life. That’s why I believe that the moon is devoid of life.

Serge: It would upset me greatly to think that there were creatures living on the moon. I like to think that the earth is the only place in the universe that sustains life. That’s why I believe that the moon is devoid of life.

Manon: Everyone says that the moon is devoid of life. People would think I’m crazy if I believed that there is life on the moon. I wouldn’t want people to think I’m crazy. That’s why I believe that the moon is devoid of life.

The answers Bernard, Serge, and Manon gave are merely explanations why they have the belief that the moon is devoid of life; none of them is also an epistemic justification of their belief. Bernard tells us that he was trained into the belief. He acquired it through social pressures. Serge believes the moon is devoid of life because of his emotional needs. The same is true of Manon; she believes the moon is devoid of life because she desires to fit in and thinks she wouldn’t fit in if she didn’t believe that the moon is devoid of life. Bernard’s belief is sustained by inertia (Bernard is simply not concerned about the matter), while Serge’s and Manon’s beliefs are sustained by desire or emotion. In none of these three cases is the

belief sustained by evidence. Bernard, Serge, and Manon have no reason to believe that *in truth* the moon is devoid of life. Only Ali is epistemically justified in believing that the moon is devoid of life, for only Ali's belief is sustained by evidence or reasons bearing on the truth of the belief.

The question "why do you believe that p?" is ambiguous. It might be asking whether and how one is epistemically justified in believing that p, or it might be asking for an explanation how one acquired the belief that p or an explanation what sustains one's belief that p. Beliefs we acquire through training or because we would like to have them have no presumption of truth, and so we are not epistemically justified in believing them.

Of course, an epistemic justification for a belief is also an explanation why that belief is held. One is not epistemically justified in holding a belief except that the reasons one has for thinking the belief true are the actual causes of one's believing it. But not all explanations why a belief is held are epistemic justifications.

An epistemic reason for believing is a reason that shows the belief (likely) to be true. A non-epistemic reason for believing, on the other hand, is a cause stemming from training or desire or emotion or preference—it is not a reason that shows the belief (likely) to be true.

5) The reliabilist account of being well justified in believing something

We said in section 2 above that philosophers are divided over at least two different accounts of epistemic justification. We laid out one of them, the one we called "the standard account," in section 3. The other we will call "the reliabilist account." It is the topic of this section.

According to the reliabilist account of epistemic justification:

If Sally is well justified in believing that toddlers are fond of ducks, then Sally has acquired the belief that toddlers are fond of ducks through a reliable belief-forming mechanism or process.

A belief-forming mechanism or process is reliable when, in the appropriate environment, the person who acquired the belief that p through that mechanism or process most likely would not have acquired the belief that p except that that belief is true. The fondness toddlers have for ducks is itself, then, causally responsible for Sally's believing that toddlers are fond of ducks, supposing that Sally acquired this belief through a reliable belief-forming mechanism or process.

On the reliabilist account of epistemic justification, being epistemically justified in believing something is a matter of the causal genesis of the belief. What matters to being justified in believing something is how one came to have the belief. If one acquired the belief in the right way, then one is justified in holding it. If one acquired it in a wrong way, one is not justified in holding it. Right ways of acquiring beliefs are those ways, whatever they are, that tend to produce true beliefs. But a way of acquiring a belief might tend to produce true beliefs in certain circumstances but not others. So one is justified in holding those beliefs that one acquired in the right ways in the appropriate circumstances.

What are the ways in which we acquire beliefs? Well, we acquire beliefs in seeing and hearing and touching and tasting and smelling the things of the world. We acquire beliefs when remembering what happened. We acquire beliefs when we mull things over. Beliefs we acquire visually when the lighting is good and we are fairly close to what we are looking at

are, we might think, typically true, at least when we are not angry or otherwise in a bad state of mind. If this is true, then visual inspection is a reliable belief forming mechanism when both the lighting and our frame of mind are good.

Just what belief forming mechanisms we have and which ones are reliable in what circumstances is not, though, a matter for philosophy or simple reflection to determine. It is a matter for science. Researchers in psychology have as one of their tasks to determine, through constructing, running, and evaluating various experiments, what are the mechanisms or processes whereby people (and nonhuman animals as well) acquire beliefs and other attitudes and how reliable these mechanisms or processes are in different circumstances.

6) Compare and contrast

Let us compare the reliabilist account of epistemic justification with the standard account. On the standard account, recall, to be justified in believing that *p* is to be aware of a good argument having “*p*” as its conclusion. In contrast, on the reliabilist account, to be justified in believing that *p* is to have acquired the belief that *p* in the right way in the proper circumstances. There is nothing in the reliabilist account about possessing an argument. Being justified in believing something is not a matter of having an argument. Nor is there anything in the reliabilist account that implies one must be aware of one’s justification for one to be justified in believing something. One can be justified in believing that *p* whether one is aware of how one came to believe that *p* or not.

We said that on the standard account of epistemic justification, phrases such as “I know it, but I don’t know how I know it” are always false, for on that account if you know something, you are aware of your good reasons for believing it and, so, you do know how you know it. On the reliabilist account, though, it can make perfect sense to say you know something but that you don’t know how you know it. It can make perfect sense, and often it is true. What matters to whether you are justified in believing that *p* is simply whether you came to believe that *p* through a belief-forming mechanism that in fact tends in those circumstances to produce true beliefs (and not false ones). It does not matter what your opinion is about whether the mechanism whereby you acquired the belief is reliable, or even whether you have any such opinion.

Which is the correct account of epistemic justification? We might want to say that both are correct. Both could be correct accounts if the notion of “epistemic justification” is vague or ambiguous. Then each would describe and make clear for us a particular part of that vague or ambiguous notion. That seems right. The standard account answers to our concern to understand epistemic justification from the inside, as it were. It is part of our concern to be well justified epistemically in what we believe and to understand ourselves so to be well justified epistemically. The reliabilist account answers to our interest in seeing our psychologies from the outside, seeing them as mechanisms or processes. Seeing them from the outside sheds light on facts about how our psychological processes operate.

Our interest in the science of belief formation is practical as well as theoretic, of course.

What we learn from cognitive psychology we will use to modify our internal standards of epistemic justification and epistemic responsibility. Should we learn, for instance, that we are apt not to form accurate beliefs about the colours of things when those things are moving above a certain speed, then we will no longer think ourselves or others well justified in

believing things have the colours they appear to have when moving above that speed. But when our interest in the science of belief formation becomes practical, it would seem we must again be thinking that epistemic justification is inferential. We no longer think ourselves justified in holding some proposition true, for we see we have no good argument from our visual experience to that proposition.

The two accounts might both be correct, but the standard account seems to prior to the reliabilist account. It seems prior because what scientists tell us about belief formation is of practical interest to us only when we think of justification on the model of the standard account. The reliabilist account seems to draw on concepts and ideas that make sense only given the standard account. The reliabilist account employs terms such as “reliably or typically produces true beliefs” and “in the right circumstances.” But we cannot really understand such terms apart from an inferentialist account of epistemic justification. To cash out “reliable” or “typical,” one would seem to have already to have certain standards in mind. The belief that someone is at the door is usually true when one acquires that belief on hearing a certain noise, but it is not always true. So, then, is the mechanism by which we acquire the belief that someone is at the door when we hear a certain noise reliable? It is or isn’t, depending on our standards of justification, “justification” understood on the standard account.

Let us review the reliabilist account of epistemic justification. If Sally is well justified in believing that her cup is full of coffee, then:

1) Sally was caused to believe that her cup is full of coffee by her cup’s being full of coffee; and

2) Sally’s cup’s being full of coffee caused Sally to believe that her cup is full of coffee through a belief-forming mechanism or process that, in the conditions Sally is in, tends to produce true beliefs.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the reliabilist account of epistemic justification and the standard account is that on the reliabilist account one can be well justified in believing that p whether one has an opinion whether one is justified in believing that p or not (one might even think one is not well justified in believing that p), while on the standard account if one is well justified in believing that p, one can cite reasons for thinking that “p” is true.