Evidence

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Abstract and Keywords

Evidentialism is the view that epistemic justification is a product of evidence. Evidentialism holds that the justification of attitudes other than belief is also determined by evidence. When one's evidence supports the negation of a proposition, disbelief is the justified attitude. When one's evidence is counterbalanced, suspension of judgment is the justified attitude. This chapter clarifies the nature of evidence and evidential support. The chapter also responds to some objections and assesses some rival views.

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We advocate evidentialism. Evidentialism is the view that epistemic justification is a product of evidence. More precisely, it holds that
Evidentialism holds that the justification of attitudes other than belief is also determined by evidence. When one's evidence supports the negation of a proposition, disbelief is the justified attitude. When one's evidence is counterbalanced, suspension of judgment is the justified attitude.¹ We favor a strong version of evidentialism: E is necessarily true. That is, evidence is what justifies belief under every possible circumstance. Furthermore, evidence justifies necessarily. That is, the justificatory status of a proposition for a person strongly supervenes on the body of evidence that the person has. Thus, we affirm the following strengthening of E.

SE Necessarily, if S1 is justified in believing P, and E is the evidence that S1 has, then necessarily, (1) on balance E supports P, and (2) if E is the evidence that S2 has, then S2 is justified in believing P.

We regard the preceding statement of evidentialism as the bare sketch of a full theory of epistemic justification. Among the things needed to develop the theory more fully are accounts of what evidence is, what it is for a person to have something as evidence, when a body of evidence supports a proposition, and what the basing relation is. In this chapter we take some steps toward clarifying the nature of evidence and evidential support. For the most part, we will simply identify our view, offering few supporting arguments. In later sections we will respond to some objections and assess some rival views.

1. Fundamental Concepts

1.1. Scientific Evidence and Justifying Evidence

According to one way in which the word “evidence” is often used, some reliable indicators of states in the world are evidence of those states.² Fingerprints of a particular sort on a weapon are evidence that a particular person handled that weapon, smoke rising from a chimney is evidence of a fire in the fireplace below, and the presence of certain spots on a child's body is evidence that the child has measles. Evidence
of this sort is publicly available. It can serve as a theoretically neutral adjudicator of disputes about the presence or absence of the state for which it is evidence. The existence of this sort of evidential relationship is something that is discovered by finding connections between a state in the world and the factors or symptoms that reliably indicate its presence. Call evidence of this sort “scientific evidence”. E is scientific evidence for P provided that E is publicly available and E reliably indicates the truth of P.3

Suppose that some factor, S, is scientific evidence, for some condition, C. One's knowing that S exists does not guarantee that one is to the slightest degree justified in believing that C obtains. One reason for this, but not our central concern here, is that one might have, in addition to S, decisive evidence against C. What is more important for present purposes is that one can have scientific evidence without having any reason at all to believe what that scientific evidence supports. A criminal investigator can know the proposition, F, that the fingerprints at the scene of a crime have precise characteristics X, Y, and Z. This can be strong, even decisive, scientific evidence for the proposition, L, that Lefty was at the scene of the crime. But if the investigator does not know, or at least have reason to believe, that F indicates Lefty's presence, then the investigator has no reason at all to believe L and is not (on this basis, at least) at all justified in believing L. To be justified in this case he must in some way grasp the connection between F and L. The investigator need not formulate the thought that F is scientific evidence for L, for F to justify his believing L. But the investigator must be informed of some indicator connection between this evidence and the conclusion for the evidence to have any epistemic impact for him.

As we use the word “evidence” in our statement of evidentialism, the investigator who is unaware of any such connection does not have evidence that Lefty was at the scene of the crime. Intuitively, the investigator who is unaware of the connection lacks any reason to believe L. As we use “evidence” in stating and defending evidentialism, one who has no reason to believe something has no evidence for it. If the investigator did have evidence, and that evidence were not
defeated by some other evidence, then he would be at least to some degree justified in believing that Lefty was there. Evidence, as we use the term, is *justifying evidence*. Thus, even though F is scientific evidence for L, F is not by itself justifying evidence for L. The conjunction of F and with information about F’s connection to L is justifying evidence for L. More generally, something can be scientific evidence for a proposition without being justifying evidence for that proposition. Justifying evidence is by itself a reason for belief, something one could in principle cite as a justifying basis for belief.

One could restrict use of “evidence” to scientific evidence and say that the detective does have evidence—F—that supports L. But then one would have to say that merely having evidence supporting a proposition is not enough to make one at all justified in believing that proposition. It is clearer and simpler to preserve the connection between having supporting evidence and justification, and thus to say that merely knowing the characteristics of the fingerprints but not having the connecting information is not having evidence for the conclusion. But this is not to say that in all cases one has justifying evidence for a proposition only if one knows (or justifiably believes) that one has scientific evidence for that proposition. Such a requirement would overintellectualize justification, incorrectly making all justification involve beliefs about evidence and evidential support. We reject such a general requirement. We will return to this topic in a later section.

The two types of evidence are connected in a way that makes sense of the use of “evidence” for both and gives instrumental epistemic value to scientific evidence. Gaining scientific evidence, E, for a proposition, P, is often the most practical way for one who knows the association of E with P to gain justifying evidence for P. This is a main way in which scientific evidence fosters knowledge.

1.2. Evidence for Settled Truths

In a well-known passage in *Sense and Sensibilia* J. L. Austin writes:
The situation in which I would properly be said to have evidence for the statement that some animal is a pig is that, for example, in which the beast itself is not actually on view, but I can see plenty of pig-like marks on the ground outside its retreat. If I find a few buckets of pig-food, that's a bit more evidence, and the noises and the smell may provide better evidence still. But if the animal then emerges and stands there plainly in view, there is no longer any question of collecting evidence; its coming into view doesn’t provide me with more evidence that it’s a pig, I can now just see that it is, the question is settled.4

We endorse the view that Austin denies here. We think that seeing the pig does provide additional evidence. Indeed, it is this additional evidence that settles the question. Moreover, the visual evidence one has in a case like this is a paradigmatic kind of evidence. We believe that all ultimate evidence is experiential evidence. We return to this topic below.

It is true that if two people are standing together looking at a pig, it would be peculiar for one to ask the other what evidence he has that there is a pig there. This is because it is typical for one person, A, to ask another, B, for evidence when A has some doubt about the proposition in question and believes that B has some relevant information that A lacks. But that is not the case when A and B are looking at the same pig. However, if A and B are talking on the telephone and B asserts that there is a pig nearby, A might ask for evidence for this claim, and B could with perfect propriety respond that his evidence is that he sees it. Thus, seeing the pig is evidence that there is a pig present, but it is not the sort of evidence worth mentioning to someone who sees it as well.5

Furthermore, when one has evidence that settles a question, it is unusual or misleading to make the weaker claim that one has evidence for that claim rather than simply to make the claim itself. Thus, if A sees that a pig is present and wants to tell B, who is not present, about the situation, it would be odd for A to say that he has evidence that there is a pig present rather than simply to assert that there is one there. But this is because asserting that one has evidence is to assert something weaker than one can properly assert, and therefore it
misleads. But one does have the visual evidence in such a case. In general, we do have evidence for settled truths. Our evidence is what settles their truth for us.

1.3. Beliefs, Experiences, and “Ultimate Evidence”

Sometimes a person cites one belief as a reason for another. We take evidence to be what provides epistemic reasons. Thus it may seem that one belief can be evidence for another belief. We see no strong reason for resisting this claim, but it is important to distinguish between “ultimate” evidence and “intermediate” evidence.

Some philosophers have argued that only believed propositions can be part of the evidence one has. Their typical ground for this claim is that only believed propositions can serve as premises of arguments. Our view differs radically from this one. We hold that experiences can be evidence, and beliefs are only derivatively evidence. Examples intuitively support that we have experiences as evidence. Your evidence for the proposition that it is warm where you are typically includes your feeling of warmth, your evidence for the proposition that you are frustrated by being stuck in the heat in a traffic jam typically includes a palpable sense of your own frustration, your evidence for the proposition that the car in front of yours in the traffic jam is red typically includes your visual experience of how the car looks, and so forth. It is not just other propositions that you believe that contribute to your justification. The experience itself contributes. Experience is our point of interaction with the world—conscious awareness is how we gain whatever evidence we have.

Furthermore, all ultimate evidence is experiential. Believing a proposition, all by itself, is not evidence for its truth. Something at the interface of your mind and the world—your experiences—serves to justify belief in a proposition, if anything does. What we are calling your “ultimate evidence” does this without needing any justification in order to provide it.

Memory often helps to justify, of course. Simply remembering a proposition can provide evidence for further propositions. This may seem to be a case in which a believed proposition—
the one remembered—is ultimate evidence. But that is not quite right. There is something else involved in memory or an experience of remembering that contributes to justification. We take this to be a plain fact of introspective psychology. There is a clear difference between a thought or image that happens to become conscious, and one that presents itself as being recalled. We hold that this latter sort of impression can be an element of one's non-doxastic evidence for the proposition.

1.4. Evidence and the Possession of Evidence

Evidentialism holds that a person's doxastic justification is a function of the evidence that the person has. One might think that the way to understand this is first to define, or characterize, what evidence is, and then to explain what it is for a person to have a particular bit of evidence. But this is a mistake. It is not the case that something just is, or is not, evidence. To see why this is true, consider, for example, your current perceptual experience. Is this experience evidence? The best answer seems to be that it is evidence for you, but it is not evidence for the rest of us. It is part of your evidence for the proposition that you are reading an essay on epistemology. But your experience itself is not evidence for the rest of us. Experiences we would have if you were to describe your experience could be part of our evidence, but our grasp of your experience is indirect. There is no correct non-relational answer to the question “Is it justifying evidence?” Perhaps there would be no harm in saying that something is justifying evidence (simpliciter) if it is evidence for someone. However, nothing is gained by saying this either. All the epistemic work that we attempt to do with justifying evidence relies on evidence that someone has. Thus, on our usage, evidence is always evidence someone has.

One useful way to identify what we take to be a person's evidence at a time is to say that it is the information or data the person has to go on in forming beliefs. Your focal visual experiences of the word tokens in this chapter constitute paradigm examples of someone's evidence. There are extremely hard questions about what exactly a person has to go on at any given time. The central issue has to do with information stored in one's memory. At any moment one
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has some items in consciousness that can guide one's beliefs as well as a lot of information stored in memory. Some of this stored information is readily accessible, in the sense that it would immediately come to mind if one were to think about a relevant topic. Other information would come to mind only if one engaged in a long process, such as psychotherapy, designed in part to recover suppressed memories.

Versions of evidentialism can be developed that differ over what they count as one's evidence at a time. Some restrictive versions count only one's current conscious states. Some inclusive versions count everything stored in one's memory. Moderate views count some but not all stored information. The extreme views have a kind of theoretical neatness, but they are burdened with implausible consequences. The most restrictive view seems to imply that you are not justified in believing simple, obvious, and well-known truths that you are not currently thinking about. The most inclusive views imply that beliefs well supported by everything that you are thinking about can be unjustified because they are undermined by deeply buried memories that could be recovered only through extensive psychoanalysis. Moderate views have more intuitively satisfying implications, but they are difficult to formulate in any precise way.

It seems best not to take any narrow stand on the extent to which information that one has some potential to retrieve is part of the evidence that one has. A main source of support for evidentialism is its capacity to account for intuitive epistemic judgments. People vary in what they find intuitively justified for a person at a time. These varying judgments are correlated with varying judgments about what evidence the person has at the time. (The two of us often differ between ourselves about these matters and each of us often differs with himself about them over time.) It is a strength of evidentialism that it encompasses variants concerning what counts as a person's evidence that bear out these differing intuitions about justification. If there are any decisive arguments that resolve these differences, then there is a version of evidentialism within this range that accords with the conclusion of those arguments. The difficulty of specifying which retrievable information is part of one's current evidence does not call into
question the idea that it is evidence that determines epistemic status. To the contrary, it makes clear a way in which some familiar terms of epistemic evaluation are vague or obscure.

1.5. Necessity and Contingency

It is common to think of evidential relations as contingent. Consider a simple example. Suppose that you know that Smith owns a pink Corvette and you see a pink Corvette parked in Smith's usual spot in the office parking lot. It is natural to say that your observations provide evidence that Smith is in the office. Of course, this is only contingently evidence for this conclusion. This is not just because it is contingent matter that Smith is in his office given this evidence. That is, it is not just that this is not entailing evidence. Rather, the point is that it is only a contingent matter that this kind of car in this spot in the lot has anything to do with Smith at all. Smith could have driven a Yugo and kept it parked at the service station. The Corvette evidence could have been evidence for Jones's presence, since she could have been the one to drive such a car and park it in that location. These clear contingencies might be thought to argue that evidential relations are contingent matters.

On our view, evidential relations are necessary. The evidence described above about Smith, by itself, is not evidence that Smith is in the office. Instead, the described information is part of a larger body of evidence, and it is this body of evidence that is actually your evidence that supports the conclusion about Smith's whereabouts. One reason for thinking about supporting evidence in this demanding way is that it prevents overcounting. It would be a mistake to think that learning that there is a pink Corvette in the lot is some evidence for Smith's being present and that the information about Smith's automobile ownership is additional evidence for that conclusion. It is the combination of the two that provides one reason for the conclusion. In the absence of any such combination, neither item of information on its own would be any reason at all for one to believe the conclusion. Once the combination is adequately spelled out, it is intuitively a reason someone has for the conclusion under any possible circumstances where a person has that evidence. This includes
circumstances in which one has additional defeating evidence, rendering one not justified in believing the conclusion.

It is possible to understand the credibility of the views of those who say that evidential relations are contingent. Salient elements of a necessarily supporting body of evidence for something are themselves acceptable to call “evidence” for that thing. These salient elements may be, by themselves, only contingently reasons for that conclusion. Though we deny that this “evidence” always supports on its own, this use of the word is a practical way to identify key components of the supporting evidence. It is likely that a full theory could be worked out that endorses this way of speaking as literally true. It is clearer to treat the evidential support relation as a necessary relation and to explain apparent counterinstances to the necessity, as we just did. Thought experiments support this necessity. In any case, where everything that might be credibly counted as a person's evidence for a proposition could have been possessed by one who had no reason to believe the proposition, intuitively the person does not actually have supporting evidence for the proposition.

2. Kinds of Evidence

2.1. Perceptual Evidence

Ordinary perceptual judgments are often justified. For a typical singular perceptual judgment to be justified one must have a suitable perceptual experience as evidence, and some background conditions must be satisfied as well. One needs some conceptual competence suitable for applying concepts in external world perceptual beliefs, and perhaps one needs memories about how ordinary things ordinarily appear, and perhaps one also needs some general view of one's situation that does not too flagrantly conflict with the content of the belief. (There are important epistemic issues about the ingredients of this background. But we are now pursuing an issue that permits them to be set aside.)

Suppose that some such background is in place. Suitable perceptual experience is prominent in acquiring justification for any particular perceptual belief. For instance, when the belief is that \textit{that} is a tree (B1), typically one has visual
experiences, E1–En, that consist in visual qualities, some of which are arranged in some treeish fashion, as viewed from some apparent perspective. E1–En are an important part of one's evidence for B1. E1–En are one's “ultimate” perceptual evidence for B1; one needs no evidence for E1–En, and one needs no additional current experiential evidence to justify B1. If the background is in place and one has no grounds for doubting one's faculties or mistrusting the apparent situation, then one is justified in believing B1.

A line of inquiry that leads us to think that E1–En are typical of our “ultimate” perceptual evidence is the series of Socratic questions familiar from Roderick Chisholm's work.6 If one is asked, “What justifies you in believing B1?”, a satisfactory answer is, “I see that tree.” If one is asked, “What justifies you in believing that you see that tree?”, a satisfactory answer is, “It looks to me as though that's a tree.” If one is asked, “What justifies you in thinking that it looks to you as though that's a tree?”, a satisfactory answer is to ascribe to oneself experiences of treeish visual characteristics, such as E1–En, and to add background information that gives one reason to think that E1–En are characteristic of how a tree looks.7 All the answers so far given cite facts about justification that will already be present when B1 is perceptually justified. If one is asked, “What justifies you in believing that you are experiencing those treeish characteristics?”, something different is true. The content of the answer may cite evidence that one did not already have when B1 was initially perceptually justified. For instance, a satisfactory answer would be that, in an attempt to answer the previous question, one has become reflectively aware of the characteristics. But until that point, the answers to the Socratic questions cited facts that were present as one's evidence for B1. This line of inquiry traces evidence that one had for B1 back to E1–En, and nothing beyond them need have been present in order for B1 to be perceptually justified. E1–En are at the beginning of the line.

Here are two important intuitive epistemic features of E1–En. First, they can be evidence for a proposition without one's having evidence for them. So they can stop a regress of
justification, as the intuitive answers to the sequence of Socratic questions illustrates. Second, E1–En are elements of the interface of one’s mind and the rest of the world. They are ways in which the world most conspicuously intrudes into one’s conscious life. Perhaps they are “conceptualized” and perhaps they are non-conceptual. We will not resolve that difficult issue. Either way, intuitively they are the most transparent states of which we are aware. They come closest to presenting themselves as they are. Nothing available to introspection mediates between them and us. This is why they can justify without needing justification.

2.2. A Priori Evidence

Sometimes the mere contemplation of a proposition results in one becoming justified in believing it. It is possible to argue for reliabilist explanations of this, holding that our reliability in some domains accounts for our justification in those domains. It is also possible to argue that some propositions are self-evident, in the sense that mere adequate contemplation of them necessitates one’s having justification for them. On this view, necessarily if one adequately considers one of these simple propositions, one is justified in believing it. We accept neither of these views. We believe that sometimes when a person contemplates a proposition, the person acquires evidence supporting its truth. It is not necessarily the case that everyone gets this sort of a priori evidence by contemplating the same propositions. Just as some people have more acute visual faculties, some may be better able to get the evidence for some truths than others in this a priori way.

The nature of the evidence people acquire in the way just described is elusive. We will leave open many details and say only the following. In considering propositions that are the best candidates for immediate a priori justification, one becomes conscious of something about the relations among the concepts employed in considering the proposition. This non-doxastic awareness of conceptual relations provides the evidence. Thought experiments can provide a different sort of a priori justification. Intuitive judgments about hypothetical particular examples can gain evidence from awareness of conceptual relations, as before. But philosophical principles
that are properly generalized from thought experiments are not supported by such conceptual evidence. The a priori evidence for the principles supports them in a broadly inductive way.

2.3. Memory and Inference

We accept the intuitively plausible view that memory, inference, and introspection are additional sources of evidence and they can provide justification for beliefs. Details about these sources and general theories about how they work would be extremely valuable. However, the general picture is similar to that of perception. In particular, recalling a proposition is evidence that the proposition is true. (We said a bit more about the nature of memorial evidence above.) Properly inferring a proposition from others that are justified is evidence that the inferred proposition is true. (We say a bit more about inferential support below.) In all cases it is plausible to hold that these sources provide justification only when a suitable background is in place. Exactly what constitutes that background is a difficult matter we will not attempt to resolve here. Whatever exactly the background is, it is a matter of evidence. That is, the difficult issue concerns the nature of the background evidence one must have for these sources to provide justification.

3. Evidential Support

An evidentialist might adopt any of a variety of views concerning the epistemic support relation—that is, the relation that holds between a body of evidence and a proposition when it is true that a person having that body of evidence is justified in believing that proposition. One way to express a view about evidential support is by formulating epistemic principles identifying what epistemic status believing a proposition has in specified circumstances. Some of these principles will apply to cases of inferential justification—that is, cases in which a person believes a proposition as a result of inferring it from other propositions the person believes. We here distinguish several of these views and give some reasons for favoring the approach to explaining this relation that we prefer. We leave it as the most promising approach, however. It is something to be elaborated on another occasion.
3.1. Evidential Proportionalism

According to this view, every body of evidence bears some logical or objective probabilistic relation to each proposition: the evidence entails the truth of the proposition or makes it probable to some degree or entails or probabilizes the denial of the proposition. These relations are matters of deductive and inductive logic (broadly conceived). We reject this view. We think it ties epistemic relations too closely to logical relations. Specifically, it suggests a kind of logical omniscience that justified believers need not have. A person may know some propositions that logically entail some proposition that the person scarcely understands and surely does not know to follow from the things she does know. The logical route from what she knows to this proposition may be complex and go beyond her understanding, or even the understanding of any person. In our view, the person is not then justified in believing the consequence, even though it is entailed by her evidence. It is noteworthy that, to become justified in believing the proposition, she has to learn something new—namely, its logical connection to her evidence. Thus, in this case, the entailing evidence is not justifying evidence. Something more is needed. People frequently have this something more in the case of simpler logical connections.

The same thing can be true in cases of evidence that confers only logical probability on a conclusion. Where this probabilistic relation is beyond the person's understanding, the person may not be justified to any degree in believing a proposition made probable by the evidence.

Thus, evidential support is not simply a matter of entailment or probabilistic connections.

3.2. Subjectivism

A second possible view about the evidential support relation is that evidence E supports P for person S just in case S believes that E entails or makes sufficiently probable P. There is room for variation on exactly what the content of S's belief about the relation between E and P must be, but the idea of subjectivism
is that the support relation depends upon S believing that a suitable relation holds between E and P.

We reject this account for two reasons. For one thing, it implies a meta-level requirement that we reject—namely, that justified belief in all cases requires believing that some suitable objective relation holds between one's evidence and the content of one's beliefs. There can be knowledge and justified belief in the absence of any such beliefs about evidential relations. Children and unsophisticated believers provided clear examples of this, and even sophisticated believers often lack explicit beliefs about the connections between their evidence and their conclusions.

Furthermore, merely believing that the relation obtains is too weak a requirement. Were it sufficient, wild and unjustified beliefs to the effect some evidence supports a conclusion would then render justified those conclusions. As we noted earlier, there are cases in which justifying evidence must include a belief about the connection between some scientific evidence and a conclusion. In the cases in which justification for a conclusion does depend upon a belief that the evidence is properly related to that conclusion, then this belief about the connections must itself be justified. But, on pain of an intolerable infinite regress, actual belief in such a connection cannot be required in all cases.

Thus, evidential support is not simply a matter of belief (or even justified belief) in logical or probabilistic connections.

3.3. Non-Doxastic Seemings

Sometimes, when someone reflects on some evidence, it is appropriate to say that it “just seems” to the person that it supports a conclusion. A possible view about evidential support makes significant use of these “seemings”, holding that E supports C for a person S provided it seems to S that E has a proper logical or probabilistic relation to C. Its seeming to S that E supports P is a non-doxastic state, not a belief that E supports P. As a result, this view avoids our objection to the subjectivist view just discussed. It is also important to note that a seeming is not the sort of thing that needs justification.
So, if a seeming justifies, then it is capable of stopping a regress of justifiers that are in need of justification.

The view that justification results from non-doxastic seemings can be formulated in a way that renders it compatible with our claim that evidential relations are necessary. Rather than regarding the evidential support relation as relativized to believers, one can regard the seeming state as part of the evidence and hold that, necessarily, anyone who has a certain body of evidence, including the seeming, is justified in believing the same propositions.

This theory has some welcome implications, since it provides a way to account for the justification of much that we are inclined to regard as justified. One can say that typical perceptual experiences seem to the perceiver to support ordinary propositions about the world, that typical memorial experiences seem to support belief in the propositions they are about, that the premises of simple arguments seem to support their conclusions, and so on.

Nevertheless, we do not find this view satisfactory. For one thing, these non-doxastic seemings are not necessary for justification. When one has a fully articulated good reason to believe something, then the conclusion is justified whether one has the additional non-doxastic seeming state or not. Furthermore, the existence of these non-doxastic seeming states is doubtful. It is easy enough to identify spontaneous beliefs about connections between propositions. It is easy enough to identify feelings of confidence about these beliefs. But it is at least quite difficult to discern any state other than a belief or a level of confidence that can be properly characterized as its seeming to one that E supports P.

3.4. Epistemic Principles

Another view about the epistemic support relation asserts special epistemic principles of the sort Roderick Chisholm long defended. These principles state, for instance, that, if certain psychological conditions obtain, then particular propositions are justified. For example, if a person had certain perceptual experiences, then the person was justified in believing particular propositions about the world; if the person
had certain memory experiences, then believing the contents of those memories was justified; if a person observed another person behaving in a particular way, then the person was justified in believing that the other person was in particular mental states; and that, if a person observed certain states of the world, then the person was justified in believing particular ethical propositions. Chisholm held that these principles were not special cases of more general logical principles. They were special epistemic principles.

What is distinctive, and troubling, about Chisholm's view is not so much the specific claims he made about what justifies what. His distinctive and troubling claim is that these principles do not derive from any more fundamental or more general ones. It is difficult to resist the thought that these are principles designed to ratify the beliefs that Chisholm thought were justified. Even if one agrees with Chisholm's judgment about these matters, there is a troubling arbitrariness and specificity about his choice of principles. This can best be seen by considering contested cases. Some will say that certain kinds of religious experiences provide justifying evidence for propositions about the existence and nature of God. Others deny this. Chisholm's view seems to imply that one side or the other is right in this dispute, but there are no more fundamental principles to resolve the dispute. Either such experiences just do justify the corresponding propositions or they just do not, and that is all there is to it.

In our view, if perceptual and memorial experiences are justifying (with the proper background in place), then, there is something about them that makes this the case. If religious experience shares this feature, then it, too, is justifying. If it does not, then it is not. There must be a more illuminating truth about why the experiences are justifying.

3.5. Best Explanations
We believe that the fundamental epistemic principles are principles of best explanation. Perceptual experiences can contribute toward the justification of propositions about the world when the propositions are part of the best explanation of those experiences that is available to the person. Similarly, the truth of the contents of a memory experience may be part
of the best explanation of the experience itself. Thus, the general idea is that a person has a set of experiences, including perceptual experiences, memorial experiences, and so on. What is justified for the person includes propositions that are part of the best explanation of those experiences available to the person. Likewise, one's inferences justify by identifying to one further propositions that either require inclusion in one's best explanation for it to retain its quality or enhance the explanation to some extent by their inclusion.

There are important details of this account that are yet to be developed. In particular, we need an understanding of best available explanation that does not include too much. It may be that the best scientific explanation of a person's current experiences includes detailed scientific theories or distant logical consequences that the person does not understand. Such an explanation is not available to the person. A precise account of this availability is difficult to develop.

The best available explanation of one's evidence is a body of propositions about the world and one's place in it that make best sense of the existence of one's evidence. This notion of making sense of one's evidence can be equally well described as fitting the presence of the evidence into a coherent view of one's situation. So it may be helpful to think of our view as a non-traditional version of coherentism. The coherence that justifies holds among propositions that assert the existence of the non-doxastic states that constitute one's ultimate evidence and propositions that offer an optimal available explanation of the existence of that evidence.

One's justification for a proposition can be of various strengths. Correspondingly, one's evidence varies in the strength of its support of different propositions. According to our explanatory coherence view of evidential support, this variation in strength of support derives from differences in how well the supported propositions explanatorily cohere with one's evidence.

4. Objections
4.1. Entailing Perceptual Evidence?

John McDowell can be interpreted as suggesting that there are crucial items of non-doxastic evidence that our account omits.¹¹ Read in this way, his view presents a strikingly different account of perceptual evidence. When one sees that that’s a tree, the view implies that one has as evidence the perceptual state of seeing that that is a tree (PS1) for the proposition that's a tree (B1). PS1 is factive; it cannot exist unless B1 is true. The suggestion is that, when we are in PS1, we have PS1 as entailing evidence for B1 and we can know B1 by believing it on the basis of that evidence.¹² There is no appeal here to what we count as the ultimate evidence—the experiential states E1–En.

We do not deny that there is a sense in which PS1 is evidence that one sometimes has for B1. We are mentalist evidentialists. That is, we think that one's justifying evidence supervenes on the totality of one's mental states. Since PS1, the factive mental state of seeing, is not present when one is visually deceived, our view allows that one has PS1 as evidence in the veridical case and not when one lacks when deceived. Although a person may have the factive mental state as a reason in the veridical case, one does not need to have as a reason any such state for B1 to be justified. We deny that PS1 strengthens one's justification for B1 over what one has in cases that are otherwise maximally similar except that PS1 does not exist. That is, when B1 is visually justified for one, it is so justified by a body of evidence that prominently includes ultimate evidence like E1–En (in the presence of some suitable background of the sort previously described). When PS1 exists, belief that it exists is ultimately justified by the likes of E1–En. The evidence on the basis of which the belief that PS1 exists can be known need not include the entailing evidence of PS1 itself.

Here are a couple of reasons for doubting that it is PS1, instead of E1–En, that ultimately justifies B1 in ordinary cases of knowing B1 by visual perception. First, PS1 has a justifying strength that intuitively derives from its relation to E1–En. It will be helpful to compare cases in which one sees a tree with cases in which one is deceived by a mere tree façade. If PS1
were ever one's ultimate evidence for B1, then PS1 would be available as *entailing* evidence when one saw a tree and was in state PS1. When PS1 did not obtain, as when one was deceived by a tree façade, one would have no entailing evidence on behalf of B1. Yet, *intuitively*, one has equally good evidence for B1 in both cases. If the evidence is the same in both cases, then is it no wonder at all that the evidence is equally good. If PS1 were what ultimately justified in the veridical case but not in the façade case, then there would be no straightforward explanation of the equal quality of the evidence.

Second, suppose that one did happen to guess correctly that one was seeing a mere tree façade (B2). Intuitively, one would *not* know B2, and one would *not* have good evidence that B2 was true. Yet one would be in a relational state (PS2) that related one to a tree façade in just the way that PS1 relates one to a whole tree in the veridical case. This state PS2 seems to be as good a candidate for being an ultimate justifier, on the approach attributed to McDowell, as does PS1 in the perceptual case. But, again, the belief that one is seeing a tree façade would be un*justified*, in spite of one's being in PS2. This difference in justifying capacity of such similar states is a liability of the attributed approach. The difference supports the thought that neither PS1 nor PS2 is as transparent to awareness as are the likes of E1–En. The latter thus have better claim to being fundamental evidence than does PS1 or PS2. It is simpler and more unified to think that in both cases the evidence that explains why one is justified, and the strength of the justification, is what we count as the ultimate evidence. Again, PS1 still may be evidence that one has when one has the perceptual knowledge. But its evidential status derives from one's having the ultimate evidence of perceptual experience. PS1 does not enhance one's justification for B1 beyond what the ultimate evidence provides.

4.2. Only Knowledge as Evidence?
Timothy Williamson identifies one's evidence with one's knowledge. He argues for this identification. Our view allows that some evidence is knowledge. But some of Williamson's
arguments jeopardize the conception of evidence that we are proposing here. We will respond briefly to the arguments.

One argument with negative implications for our view is this. "If one's evidence were restricted to the contents of one's own mind, it could not play the role that it actually does in science. The evidence for the proposition that the sun is larger than the earth is not just my present experiences or degrees of belief". 15

We note initially that Williamson has reason to hope that this argument fails. What Williamson's own view implies is that one's evidence is restricted to the contents of one's mind. Again, his view is that one's evidence is one's knowledge, and in the initial chapters of Knowledge and its Limits he goes to considerable lengths to argue that knowledge is a mental state.

In any case, the argument does fail. In our view, one's evidence is restricted to the contents of one's mind. But, contrary to the claim of the first sentence, our topic—the justifying evidence that one has at a time—does not play the role of "the" evidence of science. There is no reason to think that the two are the same. We take it that the scientific evidence is something like the publicly accessible reliable indicators that are recognized by science. Again, we think this has an understandable connection to the justifying evidence. The scientific evidence is particularly useful in acquiring justifying evidence. But the two are clearly different.

Williamson also argues that there are central theoretical functions of the ordinary concept of evidence that require evidence to be propositional in form (pp. 194–7). This does not directly dispute our position. Our view is that one's ultimate evidence is non-doxastic. It includes items that are rightly described as perceptual experiences, but we need not deny that all evidence is propositional. A visual experience as of something blue against a white background might consist in an awareness of propositions to the effect that certain visual qualities are arranged in a certain configuration. Still, we would prefer to leave open the propositional status of ultimate
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evidence. To this end, we will argue for the failure of Williamson's arguments.

Williamson cites the role of evidence in inferences to the best explanation and in probabilistic reasoning. Here is his reasoning in the former case: "where evidence does enable us to answer a question, a central way for it to do so is by inference to the best explanation. Thus evidence is the kind of thing which hypotheses explain. But the kind of thing which hypotheses explain is propositional. Therefore evidence is propositional" (pp. 194–5). In the course of defending the premise in this argument claiming that what hypotheses explain is propositional, Williamson mentions the topic of explaining events. He says that a request to “Explain WWII” is a request to explain why the Second World War occurred or had some distinctive feature. The latter are clearly propositions to the effect that the Second World War occurred or had the feature. We note that precisely the same can be said about explaining non-propositional candidates for evidence. If a sensory experience is an event, a state of affairs, or some other non-propositional entity, that is no barrier to its serving as a legitimate topic of inference to the best explanation. A request to explain the evidence consisting in an experience can equally be understood as a request to explain why the experience occurred, obtained, or had some other feature.

The same goes for the subject matter of probabilistic reasoning. Williamson writes: “probabilistic comparisons of hypotheses on the evidence depend on the probabilities of the evidence on the hypotheses. But what has probability is a proposition; the probability is the probability that . . . At least, this is so when probability has to do with the evidential status of beliefs, as now . . .” (p. 196) We respond that in the probability case too, the evidence can be equally well understood as non-propositional experiences, or the like. “The probability on the evidence” can be harmlessly understood as the probability on the proposition that the evidence occurred, existed, or the like. Indeed, Williamson himself says that this is what we mean in speaking of this sort of probability of an event—we mean the probability that the event occurred. There
is no good reason to deny the same treatment to “the probability on the evidence”.

Finally in this vein, Williamson discusses using evidence for choosing between hypotheses on the basis of various kinds of reasoning: “in choosing between hypotheses in these ways, we can only use propositions which we grasp. In those respects, any evidence other than propositions which we grasp would be impotent” (p. 197). Once again, this is no good reason to think that the evidence itself is propositional. Propositions to the effect that the evidence exists, or the like, can serve to state the reasons the evidence gives that adjudicate among hypotheses. We conclude that these arguments do not defend the propositional status of evidence.

Again, Williamson holds that all evidence is knowledge. This conflicts with the plausible idea that much perceptual evidence consists in non-doxastic sensory states, an idea that fits well with our view of ultimate evidence. (p.103) Williamson defends his view that perceptual evidence is restricted to known propositions. We shall argue that the defense fails.

Williamson acknowledges that a simple proposition, such as the proposition asserting that a certain mountain that one sees is pointed in shape, “does not begin to exhaust [one's] present perceptual experience”, nor does any further verbal description capture the richness of the experience in words. Williamson denies that this fact undermines his view. He proposes that the experiential evidence about a mountain's shape that one acquires by looking at it can be conveyed by pointing and saying, “It is that shape” (pp. 197–8). This is supposed to be well suited to expressing a proposition that one knows.

This demonstrative account is highly problematic. It seems both too specific and too external. A natural thought is that one is demonstrating a shape of part of the mountain's surface. Perhaps the demonstrated shape is a two-dimensional geometrical feature of the surface of the mountain—the configuration of a line along the mountain's surface that is perpendicular to the angle of view. But any such configuration
would have numerous small details that are not seen. One does not know anything so specific about the mountain's surface. Some shape that does not exactly follow the surface is thus needed. Yet it is not at all clear that, by simply pointing at a mountain and saying "that shape", one could designate any such shape—what would determine exactly where the line goes?

In any case, Williamson's view is that no specific shape is demonstrated. He claims: “That shape must be unspecific enough to give my knowledge that the mountain is that shape an adequate margin for error in the sense of Chapter 5” (p. 198). This claim is obscure. It is not at all clear either what an unspecific shape is, or how one would manage to demonstrate anything other than a specific shape by a use of “that shape” while pointing at a mountain.

The problems increase in the case where one is under the illusion that one sees a mountain. Williamson proposes that the perceptual evidence one gets in such cases is the knowledge that the mountain appears to be that shape. He gives some attention to the issue of whether ordinary perceivers have the concept of appearance needed to grasp this proposition. But he does not discuss the interpretation of the noun phrases in his expression of the knowledge: “the mountain“ and “that shape”. When it is only an illusion that one sees a mountain and in fact one sees no physical object, it is quite doubtful that “the mountain” expresses any descriptive concept that both is on the subject’s mind (consciously or otherwise) and contributes to expressing a true proposition. It is yet more doubtful that under such circumstances any shape (specific or otherwise) is designated by using “that shape” in an attempt to demonstrate a mountain's shape. Without such a shape, the proposition is not true and hence it is not known.

Even if there is some suitable proposition in illusory cases, it is doubtful that the proposition satisfies the doxastic condition on knowledge.17 Williamson contends that people know some propositions that they do not consider. He does not give any other reason to think that one believes all the perceptual experience propositions that formulate what is intuitively one’s
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perceptual evidence in non-veridical perceptual cases. The hypothesis that all who have deceptive perceptual evidence have some suitable doxastic attitude toward all these appearance propositions is a highly doubtful empirical claim. The need for this claim is a severe liability of the view that only knowledge is evidence.

5. Conclusion

We have described the approaches we favor to the nature of evidence and evidential support. We have elaborated the approaches to various extents and defended them against some objections. Work remains to be done. We hope to have done enough in support of our preferred version of evidentialism to show that the further work is worth doing.

Notes:

(1) A second epistemic evaluation is important. A person can have evidence that on balance supports a proposition, yet the person might believe the proposition not on the basis of supporting evidence but rather for some epistemically defective reason. In that case, the belief itself deserves an unfavorable epistemic evaluation, even though believing is the justified attitude. Such believing is “ill founded”. Beliefs based on justifying evidence are “well founded”. Knowledge requires well-founded belief.


(3) “Publicly available” is vague in a way that we take to match “evidence” used in this way. Availing oneself of this evidence need not be easy. Some scientific evidence can be observed only by using exotic technology. In contrast, an individual’s sensory states are not sufficiently available to the public to count.

(5) This is not to say that seeing a pig is what we shall call (just below, in Section 1.3) a person’s “ultimate evidence”—evidence one has for which one need not have evidence. When one sees that a pig is there, one has evidence that one sees a pig there.


(7) Chisholm's account does not explicitly include this last element.


(9) For a defense of a view according to which seemings in general provide prima facie justification for their contents, see Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).


(11) McDowell has been so interpreted by Duncan Pritchard and Ram Neta, in “McDowell and the New Evil Genius”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, forthcoming. They use the phrase “empirical reason” for what we are here calling evidence. One brief basis for this reading can be found in John McDowell, “Knowledge and the Internal Revisited”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 64/1 (2002), 97–105.

(12) This claim is independent of the claim that people who have veridical perceptions are in states disparate from those of victims of deception. For all that has been said so far, it may be that in veridical cases the likes of E1–En are present along with PS1, or it may be that in veridical cases the likes of E1–En are not present.

(13) PS2 would not be the *perceptual* state of seeing that *that* is a tree façade, because that perceptual state is knowledge entailing and the guess would not be knowledge.
(14) See Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 9. All page references in the text are to this work.

(15) Williamson goes on to consider whether including as well the evidence that others have yields the evidence of science and he contends that it does not. See ibid. 193.

(16) For one thing, the exact form of the propositions is problematic. For instance, are they all first-person propositions about how one is experiencing, or are they typically only about the contents of the experiences?

(17) The needed attitude may not be exactly belief. But some sort of positive doxastic appraisal is necessary. Many philosophers have noted the limited extent of our appearance beliefs. See, e.g., John Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), 61–3.