

Justified false belief

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For most epistemologists, it is almost obvious that someone can be justified in believing something that happens to be false. For some non-philosophers such a position is dictated by simple charity: there seems to be something arrogant about claiming that no belief can be justified unless it is true. For others, though, there is something counterintuitive about such a pairing of “justified” and “false.” Granted, these hard-liners insist, it is wrong to mistreat people just because they’re mistaken about something, but that doesn’t mean we have say it’s OK for them to be mistaken—and if we say they’re justified, aren’t we saying it’s OK? Well, no, except in the sense that we would say it’s OK to be human. Justification in this context is just a matter of meeting reasonable expectations, and in order to be reasonable, expectations have to allow for human fallibility.

Feldman discusses what he calls The Justified False Belief Principle (JF) in his *Epistemology*¹. If we reject it, he notes, we’re practically forced into a position of extreme skepticism if not pure pyrrhonism, because any claim of justification would then be tantamount to a claim of infallibility: If I am in fact justified in believing *P*, then *P* must in fact be true. Let’s elaborate. Pick any criteria of justification you like. Suppose I believe *P* and Jones believes *Q*, and we do so on the basis of equivalent criteria. Then either we are both justified or neither of us is justified. But if JF is false, then that cannot be so if it happens to be the case that *P* is true and *Q* is false. Thus, at least on any issue about which reasonable people may disagree, either everyone can be justified or else nobody can be.

JF also follows from a principle Boghossian calls *blind entitlement*² and I prefer

¹Richard Feldman, *Epistemology* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2003).

²Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006). See also Paul Boghossian and Timothy Williamson, “Blind Reasoning,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary Volume 77 (2003), <http://as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/1153/blindreasoning.pdf>.

to call *default entitlement*. (Entitlement is not quite the same thing as justification, but for the time being we can treat them as interchangeable.) A similar notion was proposed by Everett.³ The idea, as I construe it, is just that everyone is justified up to some point in accepting the pronouncements of their epistemic communities. An epistemic community is not easily defined, but it consists at least of the people one believes with good reason to be knowledgeable about those matters concerning which one is unlearned. In this context, a good reason is not necessarily what philosophers or anyone else outside the community would deem acceptable. Here, a quintessential example of a good reason would be that one was born and raised by and among some or all of the people in question. An epistemic community is primarily a social group. It is our human nature to believe what we are taught while growing up, and part of that teaching typically includes instruction to trust certain identifiable authorities. Evolution programmed our brains to work this way, and with good reason. For most of human history, in most of the situations that most people were usually in, this sort of credulity was better than compulsive skepticism as a survival mechanism. As a philosophical defense of any particular belief, it has obvious problems, but a useful philosophy has got to take it into consideration.

We deal with it by the allowance “up to some point.” We are hard-wired with a tendency to trust our mentors, but we’re also capable of overriding that tendency. At what point do we acquire the obligation to do so or at least make an effort to do so? There is no answer that does not beg some questions, but we can at least avoid the presumption that the obligation begins just as soon as we say to anyone, “Your mentors are wrong.” In this regard, many religious skeptics exhibit an arrogance indistinguishable from that of the most dogmatic fundamentalist. No matter how enlightened we think we are, no matter how justifiably we think so, absolutely nobody is obliged to question any *X* solely because we have told them, “*X* isn’t true, and you’d better stop listening to people who say it is true.” So, that is not the point at which someone forfeits default justification. Where the point is, exactly, depends on much

³Theodore J. Everett, “The Rationality of Science and the Rationality of Faith,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 98, no. 1 (2001).

about one's personal history. Some have more excuse than others for their epistemic intransigence. Quine and Ullian's thinking about webs of belief does much to illuminate this.⁴

And it does not matter, ultimately. There is no need for the defenders of truth to demonize the defenders of error. Justification comes in degrees, and it is reasonable to think that in every important case, truth will have more justification than any error could have. If that is ever not so—if our adversaries should actually be more justified than we are—then we can scarcely criticize them for thinking we are the foolish ones for failing to change our minds. The real problem is that there is no uncontroversial metric for justification. If I am justified in believing *P* and Jones is justified in believing $\sim P$, each of us will surely think his justification is better than the other's, and there will be no non-circular argument to which either of us can appeal in order to settle the issue to everyone's satisfaction. The debate can do nothing at that point but degenerate into reciprocal name-calling.

There still is a point, though, even if it cannot be uncontroversially located, at which a person does lose their default entitlement. No one is entitled to a presumption of their own infallibility. When faced with a live challenge, they must respond in order to maintain their entitlement. The conditions for a response to be sufficient depend on the nature of the challenge, but the challenge cannot be simply ignored. Nor can anyone deny claiming infallibility by passing it on to some authority. It gets me nowhere to say, "Oh, of course I could be wrong, but I'm just saying what *X* says, and *X* cannot be wrong." Unless I am myself infallible, my belief that *X* is infallible proves nothing. I need to defend that belief with a good argument, and if *X* is just another human being, I'm not going to have one. And what if *X* is God? That doesn't get me anywhere, either. His alleged word is contained in a book that was produced by human beings. The Bible is not presumptively inerrant unless its authors were presumptively infallible at least while they were writing it.

There could be, there probably are, some falsehoods that no one could ever be

⁴W. V. Quine and J. S. Ullian, "The Web of Belief." (1978), http://socialistica.lenin.ru/analytic/txt/q/quine_1.htm.

justified in believing, but those beliefs are such that in fact nobody does believe them, except only a few people suffering from clinically diagnosable cognitive pathologies. Those people have no epistemic communities to which they can appeal for justification. For practically every notion about which there is any public debate, there exists some epistemic community supporting that notion, and its members should not be peremptorily written off as intellectually incompetent for no better reason than that the rest of us disagree with them.

Granted that competence alone does not constitute justification, my argument here is that neither does error alone constitute lack of justification. The point is not that all false beliefs are justified. The point is that a belief does not lack justification solely because it is false, any more than a belief has justification solely because it is true. If the contrary were true, we would have to suppose that some unknown but substantial fraction of current scientific thinking is without justification. We do, of course, have good reason to suspect that much of what we think we know is going to be discredited someday, but we cannot tell what will be discredited until the discrediting evidence is discovered. In the meantime, whatever justifies our scientific thinking either works across the board or not at all. We cannot defend any theory by claiming to know that it will never be disproved. Justification does not work that way in science.

To insist that no one can justifiably believe a falsehood is to set the epistemological bar so high that none of us could ever clear it. No one among us dares think that he believes no falsehoods, but if we have done our intellectual duty, we have justified some portion of our beliefs that we think most needing justification by a careful analysis. (Nobody can, in one lifetime, consciously and deliberately justify everything they believe.) It might be objected: You might think you are justified in believing *P*, but if *P* happens to be false, then you're just mistaken to think so, that's all. But what is that supposed to mean, if it is not tantamount to a claim that justification consists simply of ruling out any possibility of error? To go there is to deny that we can justifiably believe anything at all about which reasonable people disagree. There are not many notions that could more effectively stifle all civilized debate about all the issues most in need of civilized debate.

What I suspect most bothers those who are uncomfortable about JF is its reciprocity. If I concede that people may justifiably believe falsehoods, then I must admit that some of my justified beliefs could be false. Of particular concern to skeptics is this idea: Our justified belief that Christianity is false could itself be false, if we grant that Christian beliefs might (for some people) be justified. Most of us would rather not give that possibility any consideration. We would just as soon declare categorically that there is no way for Christianity to be justified. Of course, I don't agree with any justification that Christians have so far come up with, but justifications don't have to work for me in order to work at all. More to the point, I don't need to deny justification to someone else in order to defend my disagreeing with them. Of course, my intellectual life is easier if I think I can do that, but the easy way is seldom the right way to do philosophy.

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