

## Belief, evidence, and knowledge: A response to Cling

Ted Poston

I thank Andy Cling for these careful and insightful comments. Cling effectively summarizes many of the motivations and arguments I give for my explanationist view. He argues that on several important dimensions my view does not live up to its promises. In particular, he charges that the version of explanatory coherentism I defend is not a form of evidentialism and, moreover, it is a kind of foundationalist skepticism. In the following I aim to answer these important claims.

Let us begin with Cling's argument that explanationism is not a form of evidentialism. Apart from terminological debates, this issue is important because it is a natural judgment that a person's evidential position completely determines the justificatory status of their beliefs. If two subjects who are identical evidentially may differ in what attitudes are justified for them then a person's evidential position does not completely determine the justificatory status of their beliefs. As I discuss in my book evidentialism is captured by the following thesis:

(ES) The epistemic justification of anyone's doxastic attitude toward any proposition at any time strongly supervenes on the evidence that person has at that time (p. 92).

Cling observes that (ES) implies a difference principle.

(Diff) For all P, if a person  $S_1$  is justified in believing P and another person  $S_2$  is not justified in believing P, then there is a relevant difference between the evidence available to  $S_1$  and the evidence available to  $S_2$ .

The problem is that epistemic conservatism implies that (Diff) is false because two persons may be in identical evidential situations and yet if  $S_1$  believes p and  $S_2$  does not then  $S_1$  is justified in believing P but  $S_2$  is not. Epistemic conservatism then does not fit with an evidentialist epistemology.

In my book I discuss the problem that conservatism poses for evidentialism (see pp. 94-5). I am grateful to Cling for pointing out the need to revise that discussion. The issue is how to understand the relevance of belief in the special state of empty evidence. One simple solution is to take the belief that p to be very weak evidence for p. I do not favor this solution because evidence is the kind of thing that can be brought to bear on a conversation over whether p is true. Even if experiential evidence cannot always be shared, one can tell another person about the experience. In this case one *says* that one has some sort of experience, but one cannot *show* the experience. Belief does not have this character. For reasons I give in the book, a subject's belief that p is not the kind of thing that bears on such a conversation. Rather a subject's belief that p is part of her perspective which in the special state of empty evidence she has a right to maintain. As I explain in my response to Gardiner, belief is teleologically ordered to knowledge and so if a belief cannot achieve coherence then the belief must be surrendered. Even so, on my view a subject does have some justification for maintaining her belief in the state of empty evidence and an otherwise identical subject lacking such a belief would not have that justification for that proposition.

Even if (ES) is inconsistent with conservatism, there is a version of (ES) that is not. (ES) is a thesis about epistemic justification and if there are kinds of justification then there are different versions of (ES). A coherentist may hold that knowledge-level justification requires coherence and so the knowledge-level justificatory status of a subject's beliefs is entirely determined by the evidence. Weak justification, the kind

that comes from conservatism, is not entirely determined by the evidence. So, explanationism is consistent with the following principle:

(KES) The knowledge-level justification of anyone's doxastic attitude toward any proposition at any time strongly supervenes on the evidence that person has at that time.

Explanationists and evidentialists can both affirm (KES). Moreover, the debates over evidentialism are unaffected by substituting (KES) for (ES). All the standard non-evidentialist views will equally deny (ES) and (KES).

There is a deeper agreement between evidentialists and explanationists that deserves stressing. Both views affirm mentalism. Mentalism is the following thesis:

S: The justificatory status of a person's doxastic attitudes strongly supervenes on the person's occurrent and dispositional mental states, events and conditions. (p. 91)

Belief is a mental state and so epistemic conservatism doesn't depart from evidentialism over S. The mentalist thesis (S) is a natural way to stress the idea that epistemic justification supervenes on a subject's perspective. Any two subjects who are mentally identical are identical with respect to which attitudes are justified for them. In consequence, epistemic conservatism is not inhospitable to evidentialism with respect to mentalism.

Cling contends that conservatism poses problems elsewhere for my view. He argues that conservatism is incompatible with anti-foundationalism and tends to imply a kind of skepticism. I first address the worry over foundationalism. Cling helpfully lays out my strategy for arguing for a unique response to the regress argument. In chapter 3 I argue that foundationalism is best viewed as a combination of views. First, there is a view about justification in absence of any reasons. Second, there is a view about inference from basic beliefs, what I call 'direct ampliative inference'. I argue that a key coherentist argument—the argument against first philosophy—targets the foundationalist view about direct ampliative inference, not the foundationalist view about justification apart from reasons. In response to this argument, I formulate a view of reasons on which reasons require a framework of justified commitments. Cling is right that my view allows for some weak justification apart from reasons. But, because knowledge requires reasons, my view does not allow that one can have knowledge-level justification apart from reasons.

It is not evident to me that there is any particular problem with this combination of views. Cling says that my view implies 'every justified belief is basic or the first component of a finite sequence of reasons that terminates with a basic belief.' Taken out of the context of my views in chapters 2 and 3, this statement is misleading. To the extent that a justified belief is basic, its justification is insufficient for knowledge. Given my INUS account of reasons, a belief that has the kind of justification necessary for knowledge is supported by a large framework of justified beliefs. Reasons can be given but those reasons depend on a body of other justified beliefs. So, on my explanatory coherentist view, it is false that reasons form a linear structure that terminates with a basic belief.

Cling finally argues that my conservative position represents a kind of arbitrariness to belief that makes it hard to distinguish from skepticism. Cling argues thusly. On my view, a person has some right to maintain any belief whatsoever when held in the special state of empty evidence. But, while it may be practically valuable to maintain such beliefs, it is difficult to see what epistemic value those beliefs have. Epistemic value requires reasons to think that those beliefs are true and my conservative position explicitly acknowledges that in such a state a person lacks such a reason.

I agree with Cling that the epistemic value attaching to knowledge requires reasons. On my view, a subject has reasons for her beliefs to the extent that those beliefs are parts of a virtuous explanatory system that beats relevant competitors. Explanatory coherence is a significant epistemic achievement. While beliefs that have only conservative justification are held without reasons, beliefs that are able to be integrated into a virtuous explanatory system have the best kind of reasons for them. They fit together so that one's perspective on the world is a unified whole that answers many challenges. Thus, as I see it, the sense in which a belief may be 'arbitrary' is the sense in which a belief can be a starting point on the long road of inquiry aimed at knowledge.