

Rival explanatory paradigms and justification: A response to Dabay

Ted Poston

Thomas Dabay provides a thoughtful and interesting perspective on my explanationist view. He focuses on the alternative systems objection to coherentism and argues that this is particularly problematic given my views about epistemic conservatism. Traditionally, the alternative systems objection targets coherentist views of justification because typical coherentist views hold that the justification of any belief is entirely a matter of its internal relations to other beliefs. The objection continues by observing that lots of different sets of beliefs—like a good work of fiction—bear virtuous internal relations to each other member of the set. But, presumably, to be epistemically justified in a belief requires more than its being embedded in a coherent work of fiction. Epistemic justification requires more than internal relations among beliefs in one's doxastic system.

I briefly discuss the alternative systems objection in my book (pp. 10-12). I argue that the objection is not especially problematic for a non-doxastic coherentist view according to which coherence must be assessed over beliefs and experiences. Experiences stand in a causal connection to the external world (beliefs do as well, for that matter), and so a coherentist is not committed to the claim that the justification of a belief is analogous to a proposition in a good work of fiction.

Any attempt to revive the alternative systems objection against coherentism is bound to fail. What made the objection persuasive was the idea that a good work of fiction can bear all the epistemically relevant relations a coherentist claims matter for justification. But non-doxastic coherentism claims the coherence must be assessed over all assertive propositional contents. Fiction is not coherent with experience (nor belief either). Thus revised, the alternative systems objection becomes the jejune observation that coherentism implies that radically alternative systems may be epistemically justified. But that's an objection to coherentism only if the truth counts against a view.

The strength of Dabay's comments lays in his interesting remarks centered on William James's remarks on faith and my attempt to explicate epistemic conservatism by way of the notion of empty evidence. James thought that we were permitted to believe certain claims in cases in which a belief was a live, forced, and momentous option. This is analogous to my claim that in the case of empty evidence we are permitted to continue to believe a claim even though it is unsupported by positive evidence. James thought that belief in some cases was permitted because otherwise certain goods could not be achieved. If one is in ill health and will recover only if one believes that one will recover then James held that belief is permissible. James may have had in mind a conception of permissibility that included practical considerations. In my remarks on empty evidence, I focus on an epistemic permission to continue to believe. But it does seem that both James and I recognize that there is a way to positively evaluate belief apart from direct evidential considerations.

Another agreement with James's remarks on faith is that some beliefs held in the state of empty evidence are momentous. In my case, an apt analogy is the way a subjective Bayesian thinks about evidence. Such a Bayesian holds that evidence is probabilistic relevance: e is evidence for p just in case $\Pr(p|e) \neq \Pr(p)$. Evidence then requires probabilities. But where do the probabilities comes from? Subjective Bayesians claim they come from belief. One's initial probability function is not based on evidence; rather it is precondition for evidence. On my view, one's initial beliefs are not based on evidence; rather they are preconditions for evidentially based beliefs. One's initial beliefs aim for explanatory integration. If they cannot achieve integration then they should be abandoned. We see here the teleological role of belief.

Dabay also highlights a problem with my remarks about empty evidence and alternative hinge propositions. The general problem is this: if there are alternative hinge propositions and such propositions are held in the state of empty evidence then there are no evidential differences between such propositions. Thus, my view implies that the resulting systems of belief cannot be compared on their evidential grounds. Dabay argues that my view can avoid this problematic response only if I give up on the idea that alternative hinge propositions are held in empty evidence.

The problem that Dabay latches onto is the implications of my explanationist view concerning the problem of pluralism. We know that there are significant differences in the opinions of reasonable people. There are differences in fundamental explanatory projects and, perhaps, some of these differences are due to alternative hinge propositions. My view implies that each person has a right to maintain alternative hinge propositions in the state of empty evidence. In such a state, there is no evidential reason for preferring one hinge over another. Yet belief aims for explanatory integration and so each person is under an obligation to inquire further. In the state of empty evidence it remains to be seen whether the hinge propositions can bear the weight of explanation. Thus, my view doesn't imply that there can be no epistemic reasons to prefer one view over another. Rational conversion is possible because one can come to see that one's initial view isn't explanatorily virtuous.

Another Bayesian analogy is instructive. Given an initial probability function, it's natural to think that one should update one's probability function in light of new evidence in a way that respects one's current opinions. Thus, one should follow the diachronic form of Bayes's theorem. Given some new evidence E relevant to a proposition p , one's new probability for p — $\text{Pr}_{\text{new}}(p)$ —should equal one's old probability for p given e — $\text{Pr}_{\text{old}}(p | e)$. While this is a natural thought, sometimes new evidence can lead you to think that your initial opinions were mistaken. In such a case one may think that it'd be crazy to follow your former opinions. The phenomenon here can be captured by the way we can trace out implications of some beliefs. We often attempt to reason people out of certain beliefs by observing that 'if you really thought that then you should think this other thing as well, but that would be crazy'. The point here is that there can be legitimate ways of criticizing alternative hinge propositions by tracing out the implications of such views.

The analogy shows us then that there are rational ways of criticizing rival explanatory paradigms without being committed to foundationalism. An explanatory coherentist may hold that some rivals paradigms are not as virtuous as others. The holistic properties of rival paradigms enables rational differences between them.