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I am grateful for Gardiner's excellent and challenging comments on my book. I cannot hope to adequately address all of the objections she raises. Instead I will discuss the reasons I think epistemic conservatism is required for a plausible coherentist view and then I will discuss the core idea behind conservatism. My hope is that within the context of a properly formulated and motivated conservatism some of the most pressing concerns Gardiner raises will appear less troubling than initial appearances.

I. Coherentism without conservatism

One of Gardiner's most interesting insights is that an explanationist view similar to mine but trimmed of epistemic conservatism is more plausible. Let us refer to this view as *trimmed explanationism*. Gardiner claims that *trimmed explanationism* is more plausible than my conservative version of explanatory coherentism. Her thought is that epistemic conservatism has a number of implausible consequences and it'd be better overall to drop a feature of a theory when the trimmed theory does just as well. I address the particular concerns about epistemic conservatism in the second half of this response. Let us then consider the claim that *trimmed explanationism* does just as well as *conservative explanationism*.

To assess this claim, we need first to consider the nature of trimmed explanationism. The view is this. The justification of a subject's belief that p depends entirely on the explanatory virtues of that belief in relation to the subject's other beliefs. The virtues do not include epistemic conservatism; rather they are exhausted by simplicity and power.

Trimmed explanationism, like my *conservatism explanationism*, is a specific instance of a coherentist epistemology. In general, a coherentist view holds that the justification of a subject's belief that p depends entirely on the coherence relations of that belief in relation to some other system S. A coherentist must specify the nature of coherence and the relata of the coherence relation. In my book I argue that explanatory coherence, particularly the virtues of simplicity, power, and fit with background beliefs, are plausible candidates for coherence relations. Moreover, I argue that a plausible choice of S is a subject's beliefs and experiences (where we understand beliefs and experiences as two ways of mentally hosting assertive representational content).

Trimmed explanationism mirrors my view minus conservatism. It holds that the nature of coherence is given by the specific explanatory virtues of simplicity and power. Moreover, it mirrors my view in holding that the second relatum of the coherence relation is the set of the subject's beliefs and experiences. It is reasonable to expect that in many cases trimmed explanationism and conservative explanationism will agree about cases. If they were in complete agreement then trimmed explanationism would be the better view.

There are two reasons to favor *conservative explanationism* over *trimmed explanationism*. First, trimmed explanationism lacks a natural answer for why the second relatum of the coherence relation should be restricted to the subject's beliefs and experiences? If the explanatory virtues are only simplicity and power then a trimmed explanationist view seems unable to resist the

¹ Thanks to Kevin McCain for helpful comments on this essay.

thought that justification depends on the simplest and most powerful system (full stop). It does not matter who's system it is. If the only virtues that matter for justification are simplicity and power then the justification of a subject's belief that p depends on the fact about which system is the simplest and most powerful. It need not matter whether this system conflicts widely with the beliefs of a subject. Copernicus's view of the universe was simpler and more powerful than Ptolemy's. But it conflicted with the then accepted Aristotelian theory of motion. The simplicity and power of Copernicus's view were not enough to make it reasonable to accept until Galileo successfully overturned the old theory of motion.

The argument in the previous paragraph is too quick, but the way in which it is too quick doesn't help trimmed explanationism. The virtues of simplicity and power are contextual. Presumably, the simplest and most powerful view would be a naive Parmenidean view according to which, appearances be damned, reality is one. On the naive view, we don't attempt to explain away appearances of diversity, we reject them. The resulting view is very simple and perfectly powerful (there is nothing that is not completely explained). It is right to complain that the naive Parmenidean view is not really powerful because it achieves its success by rejecting the data to be explained. But this is precisely the point I want to raise: simplicity and power are contextual virtues that require data. A view should be simple relative to the data to be explained. Where does the data come from? I've argued in chapters 5 and 6 the traditional appeals to the empirically given or the rational a priori do not succeed. The data comes from things that we accept, from belief. So trimmed explanationism requires conservatism. It requires that there be some data such that large scale theories are assessed for simplicity and powerful in light of the data. If the argument in this paragraph is correct then, contrary to Gardiner's claim that conservatism and explanationism are in tension, there is a deep concord between the two.

As I see it trimmed explanationism is either less plausible than *conservative explanationism* or equivalent to it. First, assuming that one can really do without conservatism, trimmed explanationism doesn't constrain justification in the right kinds of ways because the justification of a belief would not track facts about the data that one accepts, where the inclusion of that data makes the resulting view less simple and/or less powerful. Second, *trimmed explanationism* really requires conservatism because the virtues of simplicity and powerful are contextual, requiring a context of accepted data. I should add that if the data has no presumption in its favor then I don't understand why such data should constrain rational belief.

II. Core conservatism

Gardiner raises a number of formidable objections to conservatism and my specific formulation of it. Some of the challenges are raised by other commentators and, because of space limitations, I will address some of those concerns elsewhere. As I say in my book, epistemic conservatism is not a popular doctrine. A conservative epistemologist is a subversive radical epistemologist. I continue to think that epistemic conservatism is poorly understood in part because of the significant changes it requires to the way we conceive of some fundamental epistemic notions. I attempted to address this in my second chapter, but clearly more work needs to be done.

Let me step back and get at the core conservative claim. The basic idea is that a subject's belief that p makes it, *prima facie*, rational to continue to believe p . As I specify in the book, the core conservative idea does not license dogmatism. Epistemic conservatism is naturally aligned

with a respect for sound principles of evidence. How so? As I see it, belief is teleologically ordered to knowledge. That is, the goal of belief is knowledge. A belief that is not knowledge is normatively defective. It follows from this that a subject who believes *p* without knowing *p* is under a general norm to inquire further. I understand conservatism as fitting naturally with this norm of inquiry that is closed when knowledge is achieved.

A consequence of this conception of belief and inquiry is that any justification that comes from belief itself does not permit closure of inquiry. Thus, to the extent that one has some level of justification from epistemic conservatism it is normatively lacking. In the book, I attempted to get at this normative defect in conservative justification by specifying that a belief that is only justified by conservative considerations does not have the normative strength to be used (all by itself) in assertion and reasoning. I conceive of conservative justification in a dynamic rather than a static setting. A belief held in the state in which a subject has no evidence for it has two properties: first, the subject has a right to maintain that belief for a time, but the subject has an intellectual obligation to inquire further. If inquiry does not support the belief—in terms of my view, if the belief cannot achieve explanatory coherence—then the belief ought to be given up. For the resulting system of beliefs is simpler without the one that cannot be incorporated.

Corresponding to the dynamic setting and weakness of conservative justification, is the idea that the justification that a belief possesses by conservatism is enhanced by coherence relations. Thus the kind of justification that matters for knowledge requires this enhanced explanatory coherence justification. Gardiner is right to highlight the apparent tension between my conservative position—a belief has some justification in the absence of coherence relations—and my coherentist position—a belief only has justification from its coherence relations. The tension is resolved by acknowledging that the justification that comes from coherence relations is the kind of justification that matters for knowledge.

I hope that these remarks remove some of the implausibility epistemologists find in epistemic conservatism. Let me close with a brief remark about agency and belief. There is human freedom in action. A subject is permitted to choose her actions if they do not conflict with moral requirements. Similarly, with belief, a subject is free to have any belief that does not conflict with her epistemic obligations (note: this doesn't require doxastic voluntarism). As I see it the key question for a non-skeptical epistemology is whether we are free in belief to have some basic starting points which then aim for explanatory coherence. Explanatory coherence is demanding so that not every starting point is vindicated. But if some starting points can be vindicated then that is indeed an epistemic success. If human freedom does not extend to belief then we lose the perspective that knowledge is a well-earned human achievement that comes from humble beginnings.