

Making conservatism great again: A reply to Schnee

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I appreciate Ian Schnee's forceful criticisms of my attempt to explicate a plausible version of epistemic conservatism. As each commentator has pointed out, epistemic conservatism plays a pivotal role for my coherentist theory and so deserves careful attention. I argue that a belief's justification is a matter of its fit in an explanatory coherent system that beats relevant competitors. Moreover, I argue that a belief's justification is always relative to a set of background beliefs. I contend that unless background beliefs have some level of justification simply in virtue of being held then skepticism follows. The key is to formulate a plausible version of conservatism that does not do violence to our firm judgments about the role of evidence in justification. I've argued that the core conservative claim is a coherence condition on a subject's mental life. Unless a subject has a special reason to change her views, she has a right to continue to maintain those views. Or, as I put it, if a subject believes *p* in the state of empty evidence she has a right to continue to believe *p*. This epistemic right is not indefeasible. As I mentioned in my responses to other commentators, belief is teleologically ordered to knowledge. Consequently, such a coherence condition on a subject's mental states is not the be and end all to epistemology. I honestly think epistemic conservatism, properly understood, makes good epistemology. Schnee disagrees. Let us therefore reason about our differences.

Schnee's first charge against my version of conservatism is that the restriction to empty evidence is ad hoc. As I see it, respect for the evidence requires that when one has evidence one's attitudes should track the evidence. However, there are cases in which one lacks evidence entirely. Think of an initial choice of a probability function or an initial choice of natural kind terms. In such cases, I argue that one has a right to one's initial positions. One has a right to see if those views will bear the weight of explanation. Schnee finds this restriction ad hoc. It is unclear what to make of the charge of ad hocery. Being ad hoc is compatible with being true. And because I do offer reasons for the restriction, one may well think that either the restriction isn't ad hoc or that being ad hoc is even compatible with being theoretically motivated.

Schnee's charge of ad hocery does morph into a more specific criticism: that the empty evidence restriction is inconsistent with its motivations. He points to four considerations to develop the charge of inconsistency. He first picks up on my discussion of Harman's case of Karen (see pp. 37-38). Schnee observes that this case does not motivate the empty evidence restriction because in Harman's case Karen does have positive evidence. Of course, in my book I explicitly say that Harman's case does not motivate the restriction for precisely the reason that it is not a case of empty evidence (p. 38). My purpose in mentioning Harman's case is to look at the way belief plays a role in explanatory coherence. Second, Schnee observes that my mention of Sklar's principle of last resort—'belief is a justifying factor when evidential principles fail to motivate a decision'—doesn't uniquely motivate the empty evidence constraint. I don't rely on Sklar's principle to motivate the restriction. The dynamic I see at play in Sklar's principle is the implicit recognition that epistemic conservatism is a unique epistemological principle; it is not an evidential principle, but it is a principle of a different character. On my view, it is a coherence constraint on doxastic attitudes. Third, Schnee picks up on the tension between conservatism and evidentialism. Schnee's remarks are similar to Andrew Cling's and so I refer to reader to my

discussion of Cling. The fourth and final consideration that Schnee offers centers on epistemic practice. Roughly, I argue, following Lehrer, that there is no exit from the circle of belief. There is no epistemic bedrock. We always rely on background beliefs. Schnee says that this doesn't motivate empty evidence conservatism. That's a different charge from the charge of inconsistency. As to the different issue of motivation, it is plausible that if there is no exit from the circle of belief and there are epistemic dependence relations between beliefs, then some beliefs will be held in a condition of empty evidence. This isn't a formal argument—it's much too quick for that—but it is a plausibility consideration. I refer to the reader to the Bayesian analogy on evidential relevance and the role of belief I offer in my response to Dabay.

The second criticism Schnee develops is that my response to Christensen's objection to conservatism fails. Christensen argues that conservatism implies that one can correctly say 'I believe p and that's my justification for it.' In my book, I respond in Gricean fashion. There are two ways assertions can be said to be correct. They can be true or they can be conversationally appropriate (inclusive 'or'). I argue that Christensen's assertion is not conversationally appropriate because when one has only conservative justification one has nothing informative to offer one's interlocutor. One's interlocutor already knows that you believe p and so Christensen's assertion does not move the conversation along. Schnee observes that Christensen's assertion may still be true (though inappropriate) and so we can take Christensen as insisting that such an assertion is never true. The problem with this suggestion, though, is it doesn't advance the argument against conservatism. My appeal to Gricean considerations highlights that the implausibility of the Christensen assertion may be responsive to inappropriateness, not to falsity. This is an undermining move, not a rebutting move. Of course, one can insist that such an assertion is always false, but then it looks like the objection just turns into an insistence that conservatism is false.

Schnee also resists my attempt to show a way in which one can cancel any Gricean implication that afflicts Christensen's assertion. I consider a case in which a mathematician believes Goldbach's conjecture but has no grounds for it (and no grounds against it). Schnee observes that mathematicians have lots of evidence that the conjecture is true. First, this involves a controversial position on what counts as evidence for necessary truths. As Aristotle says, 'It is foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician' (Nicomachean Ethics, Book I, chapter 3). Second, the kind of case I was thinking about is much more homey. Mathematicians have beliefs about theorems prior to anything even approximating inductive evidence coming in. The theorem just seems natural or right; it is believed. In such a case it's natural to say 'I believe it, though I don't have any reason for it; it just seems right.' One might think that what is really going on here is that the mathematician has some kind of special experience—an intuition or a seeming. And so there's really positive evidence. I resist this move and argue that the relevant mental state is belief, but that is a story for another occasion.

The last criticism Schnee develops is that my attempt to provide a positive argument for conservatism from the perspectival character of justification fails. It is unclear what argument Schnee advances beyond the observation that there are other internalist views that resist epistemic conservatism. Schnee mentions Bonjour's internalism and Feldman and Conee's internalism both of which attempt to uphold the idea that the facts that determine justification are perspectival without adopting conservatism. I do argue extensively in chapter 5 'Bonjour and

the myth of the given' against such internalist views. I refer the reader to that chapter for relevant arguments against such internalist views. If internalism is true and there is no epistemic bedrock then, I contend, an explanatory coherentist view is motivated and plausible.

Let me close with two observations about the empty evidence restriction. First, Schnee does not mention my engagement with Christensen's core objection to epistemic conservatism, viz., that there's no 'i' in epistemology (see pp. 30-34). Christensen argues that the identity of the subject is irrelevant to epistemology. As I mention in the book, I think Christensen has shed light on perhaps the central worry with epistemic conservatism. If his worry is removed, then we have removed the thorn in the side of a conservative epistemology. Second, anyone broadly moved by a Cartesian epistemology wants justification to track reasons that are found in a subject's perspective. The key question is whether we always have reasons for every belief. I've argued that we do not. If those arguments are correct then a broadly Cartesian epistemology must find another natural element of a subject's perspective that provides some justification. I've argued that, suitably understood, belief fits that role. Inquiry starts with belief but ends with knowledge. If the view I develop in *Reason and Explanation* is correct then the kind of justification required for knowledge is virtuous explanatory coherence.