

# Is there an 'I' in epistemology?\*

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Abstract: Epistemic conservatism is the thesis that the mere holding of a belief confers some positive epistemic status on its content. Conservatism is widely criticized on the grounds that it conflicts with the main goal in epistemology to believe truths and disbelieve falsehoods. In this paper I argue for conservatism and defend it from objections. First, I argue that the objection to conservatism from the truth goal in epistemology fails. Second, I develop and defend an argument for conservatism from the perspectival character of the truth goal. Finally, I examine several forceful challenges to conservatism and argue that these challenges are unsuccessful. The first challenge is that conservatism implies the propriety of assertions like 'I believe p and this is part of my justification for it'. The second challenge argues that conservatism wrongly implies that the identity of an epistemic agent is relevant to the main goal of believing truths and disbelieving falsehoods. The last two challenges I consider are the 'extra boost' objection and the conversion objection. Each of these objections helps to clarify the nature of the conservative thesis. The upshot of the paper is that conservatism is an important and viable epistemological thesis.

The alleged benefits of epistemic conservatism are numerous. In addition to embodying cognitive efficiency (Sklar, 1975), conservatism alleviates many troubling epistemological problems: it helps to handle radical skepticism and skeptical worries about induction; it helps with the justification of beliefs based on memory and the phenomenon of forgotten evidence (Harman, 1986 and McGrath, 2007); it can help with the problem of easy knowledge (McCain, 2008); it helps to make sense of the role of particularism in epistemology and the role of intuition in philosophy (Fumerton, 2008); it can help to understand rational belief in the face of peer

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disagreement; and it can make sense of how perception, construed as a species of intentional states, is a source of reasons (Fumerton, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

With benefits like these one might expect conservatism to be a popular doctrine. However, the core conservative thesis that belief confers some positive epistemic merit on the content of belief is widely panned. Richard Foley says that “conservatism... must be dismissed as implausible” (Foley 1983, 179). David Christensen writes, “[T]here is something intuitively suspect in the basic conservative idea. How could the mere fact that an agent happens to believe something justify her, to any extent at all, in continuing to believe that same thing in the future?” (Christensen 1994, 70) Hamid Vahid complains that “one cannot help feeling that there must be something unsatisfactory about a thesis that takes the mere holding of a belief to endow it with epistemic worth” (Vahid 2004, 98). Even those who defend a version of conservatism quickly modify the view to avoid the implication that they will defend the core conservative thesis. Laurence Sklar, for instance, defends a “more modest” principle of conservatism, complaining against the core idea that “surely not only is believing  $p$  not sufficient grounds for believing  $p$ ... [but] believing  $p$  is *no grounds at all* for believing  $p$ ” (Sklar 1975, 377).<sup>2</sup> In short, the core conservative thesis appears to be the one thing in epistemology that everyone agrees about; conservatism makes for bad epistemology.

It is not difficult to see why the core conservative idea meets so much resistance. As traditionally conceived the goal of epistemic inquiry is to gain true beliefs and avoid false beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a neglected virtue of conservatism. If reason-giving states must have content that stand in logical relations to belief content then, arguably, conservatism lies at the heart of trusting the deliverances of any reason-giving source.

<sup>2</sup> Similar remarks can be found in Kvanvig (1989). Kvanvig writes, “The [conservative] doctrine in its starkest, and... most implausible form claims that a belief has some presumption of rationality simply because it is held. A more careful formulation of the doctrine is this: some degree of rationality can be generated for a person’s belief merely in virtue of the doxastic commitments of that person” (143).

I shall refer to this assumption as the truth goal. Roderick Chisholm expresses the idea thusly: “Each person... is subject to two... requirements in connection with any proposition he considers: (1) he should try his best to bring it about that if that proposition is true then he believe it; and (2) he should try his best to bring it about that if that proposition is false he should not believe it” (Chisholm 1977, 15).<sup>3</sup> Epistemic justification is conceived of in terms of this goal. A justified belief is one that is suitably *truth apt*, one that directly contributes to the goal of gaining true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Within this framework, the thought that a believed proposition gains some positive epistemic merit simply by being believed is apt to leave one perplexed. How does the mere fact that one believes p show that p is thereby more likely to be true than not?<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the core conservative idea seems unable to muster even enough plausibility to go to vote.

However easy this thought is to reconstruct, it is mistaken. I shall refer back to this thought as “the anti-conservative intuition”. The content of this intuition is that *there is nothing about mere belief that shows its content is likely to be true*. One of my goals in this paper is to destabilize this intuition. To accomplish that I devote the first section of this paper to the anti-conservative probability argument, an argument that takes this intuition to provide a compelling reason to reject conservatism. I will show that this argument completely fails to rebut conservatism, and, moreover, its failure undermines the anti-conservative intuition. After the first section, our dialectical position should be one in which conservatism is a live issue. I shall then turn to examining a new argument for conservatism arising from the perspectival character of the truth

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<sup>3</sup> Also, Alvin Goldman writes, “A very plausible set of [cognitive] goals are the oft-cited aims of *believing the truth*—as much truth as possible—and *avoiding error*” (1980, 32). For recent discussion on the nature of the epistemic goal see Kvanvig (2003), (2005), and David (2005).

<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to unpack this intuition (see Cohen (1984)).

<sup>5</sup> Donald Davidson conjectured that the nature of assigning meanings to utterances implied that most of one’s beliefs were true. For the purpose of this paper, I assume that Davidson’s argument doesn’t work (see Fumerton & Foley (1985) for details).

goal. The remaining sections are devoted to replying to penetrating objections to conservatism. To understand a philosophical theory it is best to look at its most forceful criticisms. I hope to show that conservatism survives the onslaught of philosophical objections.

## **1. The anti-conservative probability argument**

The core conservative thesis is that mere belief confers some positive epistemic merit on its content. Mere belief is the state of believing *p* without possessing any positive evidence for *p* and also without possessing any evidence against *p*. A subject that *merely believes* *p* is in the special evidential situation in which she lacks any evidence for *p* and any evidence against *p*. Cases in which a subject has counterbalanced evidence for *p* fall into two classes: first, when a subject *possesses* evidence both for *p* and against *p* but the balance of the evidence doesn't favor either *p* or not-*p*; second, when a subject *lacks any* evidence for *p* or against *p*. The core conservative claim is that in the special case in which a subject lacks any evidence one way or the other, the subject's believing the proposition bestows some positive merit on its content. Lawrence Sklar remarks on this special feature of conservatism, by observing that conservatism is applied as a "means of 'last resort' when other [evidential] principles fail to motivate a decision for us" (Sklar 1975, 375).

Several prominent philosophers have argued that some of our very important beliefs are merely believed. David Hume considers common sense beliefs about material objects (i.e., 'body' in Hume's terminology), and argues that these beliefs are not supported by either reason or sense experience. The correctness of these beliefs must be assumed in all our reasoning (*Treatise* 1.4.2). Wittgenstein argues that many beliefs form the inherited background against which we distinguish between true and false (*On Certainty* §94). These beliefs are affirmed without any evidence (§§136 & 138), are groundless (§166), are presupposed whenever we test anything (§163),

and form the basis for inquiry (§§472-477). P.F. Strawson picks up on this common theme in Hume and Wittgenstein. He writes, “They have in common the view that our ‘beliefs’ in the existence of body and ... in the general reliability of induction are not grounded beliefs.... [T]here is no such thing as *the reasons for which we hold* these beliefs” (Strawson 1985, 19-20). In a recent article, Crispin Wright echoes this thought as well, claiming that “*all* enquiry involves so far untested presuppositions... and that the attempt to improve one’s epistemic position in this respect is doomed to failure” (Wright 2011, 34).<sup>6</sup> In summary, these philosophers contend that we lack any evidence one way or the other for many of our important framework beliefs. These beliefs are *merely believed*.

Conservatives are committed to the thesis that if a subject *merely believes* p then the subject justifiedly believes p. Conservatives are *not* committed to belief providing some extra evidence for p or belief in the face of defeaters making it rational to believe p. The core conservative thesis is rather one about a justification-conferring factor in the absence of definite evidential considerations. I shall return to these remarks later on but the crucial point is that to evaluate the core conservative thesis one should focus on mere belief and not distracters such as potential defeaters or the evidential “boost” provided by belief.<sup>7</sup>

The anti-conservative intuition attempts to do just this. It focuses on mere belief and intuitions that there’s nothing about that state that makes its content likely to be true. One way to form this intuition into an argument against conservatism is to appeal to the instrumental character of epistemic justification, i.e., epistemic justification requires likelihood of truth.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See also Harman & Sherman (2004). Harman & Sherman argue that all knowledge rests on assumptions that are taken for granted. See, as well, Alston (1993) in which Alston argues in detail that there are no non-question begging arguments for the reliability of our basic belief forming mechanisms.

<sup>7</sup> See section 5 below.

<sup>8</sup> On the instrumental character of justification see White (2007), 117-119.

Laurence Bonjour complains that Gilbert Harman's conservative principle of epistemic justification does not uphold the instrumental character of epistemic justification. He writes, "There is no apparent reason to think that the sort of 'justification' offered by general foundationalism [i.e., conservatism] has any bearing at all on the likely truth of the beliefs in question and thereby no reason to regard general foundationalism [i.e., conservatism] as even one of the contenders for an account of *epistemic* justification" (Bonjour 2001, 692).<sup>9</sup> With this notion of justification in place, the argument against conservatism is straightforward.

Premise 1: Necessarily, a subject's belief that p is justified only if p is likely to be true.

Premise 2: Possibly, a subject merely believes p and p is not likely to be true.

So,

Conclusion: Possibly, a subject merely believes p and p is not justified.

On the face of it, this argument provides a strong reason to reject conservatism. But, the argument is deeply flawed. To make the argument clearer we need to understand the notion of 'likely to be true'. I assume that this is to talk of probabilities. Thus, to evaluate the argument we must examine how its premises fare on various interpretations of probability. I will argue that on any interpretation of probability the argument either has a false premise or begs the question against conservatism.

Let us begin by examining frequency and propensity interpretations of probability.<sup>10</sup> On these views probabilities are out there in the world. Probabilities are objective properties of statements. The probability that attaches to the statement that 'This coin lands heads' is identified with either (i) the relative frequency this coin in this particular setup lands heads over

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<sup>9</sup> Bonjour, following Harman, uses the term 'general foundationalism' in place of conservatism. The difference is merely terminological. Harman notes that his 'general foundations theory' went by the name 'general conservatism' in earlier articles. See Harman (2001), 657 note 2 and also Harman (1995) and (1999).

<sup>10</sup> See von Mises (1957) and Popper (1959).

all other outcomes or (ii) the propensity of this coin in this setup to produce heads. If these accounts are used to elucidate epistemic justification a serious problem with both interpretations is that they cannot recover a non-zero probability for necessary falsehoods. Consider Frege's belief in the axiom of comprehension. Plausibly, prior to receiving Russell's letter disclosing the now famous paradox, Frege was justified in believing that for any condition there is a set of items satisfying that condition. But, on a frequency or propensity interpretation, Frege is justified in believing the comprehension axiom only if it has a positive frequency or propensity of being true. Since the axiom is necessarily false, it lacks either of these properties. The upshot is that a frequency or propensity interpretation of probability cannot make heads or tails of the likelihood of a necessary falsehood.

One reply to this argument contends that on a frequency interpretation probabilities are relative to a reference class, and, further, that some necessarily false propositions may have a positive probability if the reference class includes contingent propositions. For example, if the proposition is ' $2^4=32$ ' and the reference class is "things one hears from a teacher" then, this reply claims, the necessarily false proposition ' $2^4=32$ ' may have a positive probability. In response, I doubt that this reply adequately addresses the problem. One often knows that a proposition is necessarily true, if true at all and otherwise necessarily false. Suppose one is considering the Riemann hypothesis that *all non-trivial zeros of the zeta function have real part  $\frac{1}{2}$* . One learns the Riemann hypothesis from a reliable informant, a person whom one knows speaks the truth 9 times out of 10. Should one's probability of the Riemann hypothesis be .9? One knows that it is either necessarily false or necessarily true. In this case it does not make sense to give the probability of the Riemann hypothesis in the way the frequentist envisions. The fact that the reference class includes contingent claims is irrelevant to the probability of the Riemann hypothesis. Moreover, whether or not the reference class includes contingent claims, when one

knows a proposition is either necessarily true or necessarily false one thereby knows that it doesn't have a non-extreme chance of being true. It is inadequate from an epistemological perspective to identify its probability with a ratio of true cases to all the cases.

The problem of justified necessary falsehoods afflicts the logical interpretation of probability as well.<sup>11</sup> On this interpretation probabilities are determined by an a priori examination of the space of possibilities. However, like the frequency and propensity interpretation, a logical interpretation of probability cannot recover a non-zero probability for necessary falsehoods. After intense reflection on the nature of space Euclid might think that *necessarily, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line*. Plausibly, Euclid could be justified in believing this; however, it is necessarily false.<sup>12</sup> Thus the logical interpretation falsifies the connection with positive epistemic merit and likelihood of truth.

The subjective interpretation of probability can recover a probability for necessary falsehoods but it falsifies the other premise of the anti-conservative probability argument.<sup>13</sup> On the subjective interpretation of probability, probabilities are identified with degrees of belief. Because probabilities are identified with degrees of belief, the *mere fact* that one believes  $p$  implies that  $p$  is likely to be true (for a subject). Consequently, the above argument against conservatism fails on this interpretation, i.e., premise 2 is false.

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<sup>11</sup> See Carnap (1950).

<sup>12</sup> The content of Euclid's belief is the modal thought that *necessarily p* ( $\Box p$ ), where 'p' abbreviates the sentence 'the shortest distance between two points is a straight line'. Because non-Euclidean geometries illustrate the possibility of not-p, the content of Euclid's belief is false, i.e., possibly not-p ( $\Diamond \sim p$ ) or not-necessarily p ( $\sim \Box p$ ). Within an S5 modal logic the modals (possibly & necessarily) are themselves necessary. This means that Euclid's belief is necessarily false, i.e., necessarily not necessarily p ( $\Box \sim \Box p$ ).

<sup>13</sup> For a development of subjective probability see Howson and Urbach (1989). Some may wish to appeal to what an ideally rational agent would believe. The argument I give in the next paragraph about the evidential interpretation applies to this move as well.



The remaining interpretation is the evidential one.<sup>14</sup> This interpretation identifies probabilities with a subject's strength of evidence.<sup>15</sup> On this approach, premise 2 of the anti-conservative probability argument is true. As the evidentialist sees it, when a subject merely believes  $p$  there is no evidence for  $p$  and no evidence against  $p$ . Thus, on the evidential interpretation,  $p$  is not likely to be true.

The basic problem with this argument is that it assumes that unless one's belief is buttressed by positive evidence in its favor it cannot be rational from a purely epistemic point of view. But this is precisely the point at issue between the conservative and the evidentialist. The main epistemological question concerns the normative status of beliefs in the special case in which a subject lacks evidence for them one way or the other. As I observed above, many of these beliefs are framework beliefs that provide the underlying structure for reasons. Carnap, for example, provided a framework for understanding the probability of any particular statement but, as Goodman observed, Carnap had to first choose a language with predicates like 'green' instead of predicates like 'grue'. Which predicates one allows in the language significantly affects the subsequent epistemological landscape, and this choice cannot be modeled by a probability function. Thus, the evidentialist must make sense of some rational beliefs that cannot be modeled by a probability function. Consequently, the evidentialist cannot simply appeal to the evidential interpretation of probability to argue against conservatism. Rather the evidentialist needs more subtle argument here.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Achinstein (2001), Ch 5.

<sup>15</sup> A variant of this involves an idealization about what an ideal rational agent would believe.

<sup>16</sup> The conservative can take the argument to the evidentialist by pressing crucial assumptions upon which evidentialism depends. For instance, evidentialism assumes that the meanings of our terms are constant and yet it is difficult to see how one could have any evidential justification for this.

The failure of the anti-conservative probability argument is instructive. When people consider the conservative thesis they are apt to be perplexed as to how it could be true. After all, if epistemic inquiry is directed to the truth and epistemic justification assesses a belief along this dimension, it is hard to see how the fact that a subject merely believes  $p$  raises the chance that  $p$  is true. The failure of the anti-conservative argument destabilizes this intuition. The intuition invokes probability considerations, and we've just seen that any interpretation of probability will imply either that there's no interesting connection between probability and justification (i.e., some non-epistemic interpretation of probability) or that the interpretation of probability invokes epistemic notions (e.g., strength of one's evidence). Neither option supports the anti-conservative intuition. Regarding the first option, if there's no interesting connection between justification and probability then the failure of mere belief to make its content probable is not, in and of itself, epistemically noteworthy. Some necessary falsehoods have zero probability and yet a subject can be justified in believing them. On the other hand, if an interpretation of probability invokes prior epistemic notions then the failure of belief to render its content probable is simply another way of saying that mere belief is not epistemically relevant. Putting the point in the language of probability just obscures the fact that "the anti-conservative" intuition begs the question.

The failure of this intuition points to the special character of internalistic norms for rational belief. Internalistic norms all lack the ability to demonstrate that beliefs sanctioned by those norms are likely to be true in any interesting sense. Consider, for instance, an internalistic norm for testimony: necessarily, if  $S$  asserts that  $p$  to  $H$  then  $H$  is prima facie justified in accepting  $p$ . Any attempt to ground this norm in facts about probabilities will fail for the same reasons mentioned above. A subject may assert a necessary falsehood and yet the hearer is prima facie justified in accepting this. In the same way, an advocate of phenomenal conservatism—the thesis that necessarily, seemings confer prima facie justification—cannot show, in any interesting

sense, that the content of the seeming is likely to be true.<sup>17</sup> It may seem to one that for every description there's some set of things satisfying that description, and, in virtue of which, one may be justified in believing it. The opponent of conservatism must therefore prove that there are *special* problems with belief that warrant rejecting conservatism without assuming the wholesale falsity of internalistic norms. I shall look at attempts to do this in later sections.

## **2. Conservatism & the perspectival character of the truth goal**

Are there any good arguments for conservatism? One argument for conservatism appeals to the fact that our epistemic practices are significantly conservative. When we take into account the force of new evidence we follow the maxim of minimal mutilation.<sup>18</sup> Another reason for conservatism is that it is required to avoid wholesale skepticism.<sup>19</sup> Both of these arguments have merit, but foes of conservatism have not found the arguments persuasive. Richard Foley has argued against Sklar's claim that conservatism is required to avoid wholesale skepticism.<sup>20</sup> Further, the fact that our practices are deeply conservative seems to many opponents of conservatism to be a lamentable feature of our epistemic practices. Moreover, both these arguments lack a clear grounding in the primary truth goal. This section formulates and defends an argument for conservatism from the perspectival character of the truth goal.

The crucial steps of this argument are first that a subject *must* rely on her perspective to fulfill the epistemic goal and second that a subject has a right to rely on her perspective. As we have seen, the truth goal is to believe truths and avoid believing falsehoods. A subject that attains this goal realizes a *cognitive achievement*. Cognitive achievements are not gained by accident or luck.

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<sup>17</sup> For a defense of phenomenal conservatism see Huemer (2001).

<sup>18</sup> See Quine (1990) and Sklar (1975).

<sup>19</sup> See Sklar (1975), 376.

<sup>20</sup> See Foley (1983).

To achieve the truth goal a subject must direct her doxastic activity in ways she sees fit to realizing this goal. Even though a subject fails to have direct control over her beliefs, she does have some control over her doxastic forming practices.<sup>21</sup> Plausibly, to achieve the truth goal a subject aims these practices in the direction of truth. The crucial point is that this guidance is directed by *a subject's perspective*. A subject has various beliefs about what constitute reliable and unreliable methods (or, minimally, relative strength of reliability) and to achieve the truth goal she will guide her doxastic practices by this light.

Keith Lehrer has emphasized the fact that a subject must rely on her perspective to decide what she should believe. Lehrer argues that there is “no exit from the circle of one’s beliefs” because justification must always proceed through some belief (Lehrer 1974, 187-88). Lehrer argues that experience cannot provide justification alone unless experience is underwritten by a belief that the experience is veridical.<sup>22</sup> As Lehrer puts it, “The prick of sense often elicits ready consent, but what we believe in the fact of sensory stimulation depends on our antecedent convictions” (Lehrer 1974, 188). If a subject woke up one morning with the new sense of clairvoyance she wouldn’t be justified in believing its deliverances unless she had some reason for thinking that this sense is reliable. Our familiarity with relying on the deliverances of memory, rational insight, and perception obscures the fact that what goes for apparent clairvoyance goes for other sources of information as well. There is no escaping the fact that we rely on our beliefs about what constitute reliable sources of information.

Alvin Goldman, in his famous essay developing a reliabilist theory of justification, recognizes this point, writing:

What we really want is an *explanation* of why we count, or would count, certain beliefs as justified and others as unjustified. Such an explanation must refer to our

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<sup>21</sup> See Feldman (2000).

<sup>22</sup> See also Alston (1993).

*beliefs* about reliability, not to the actual *facts*. The reason we *count* beliefs as justified is that they are formed by what we *believe* to be reliable belief-forming processes. Our beliefs about which belief-forming processes are reliable may be erroneous, but that does not affect the adequacy of the explanation. Since we *believe* that wishful thinking is an unreliable belief-forming process, we regard beliefs formed by wishful thinking as unjustified. What matters, then is what we *believe* about wishful thinking, not what is *true* (in the long run) about wishful thinking. (Goldman 1979a, 18)

There is no getting around the fact that our judgments of justification and our judgments about what we should believe rely on our antecedent convictions.<sup>23</sup> The picture then is that to decide what to believe we must rely on our own beliefs. How could it be otherwise?

The next step in the argument for conservatism is that we have a right to rely on our perspective to aim for the goal of truth. This implies that we are right to rely on our beliefs to evaluate the acceptability of other claims. The rationale for this claim is based on an internalistic conception of justification together with the fact that a subject cannot aim for the truth goal without being guided by her perspective. The conception of justification I rely on is similar to that of John Pollock's and Laurence BonJour's. Pollock emphasizes that the fundamental problem in epistemology is to decide what one should believe and that considerations of justification guide us in this way (Pollock 1986, 10). BonJour's remarks on the concept of justification help to fill out Pollock's ideas with respect to the truth connection. According to BonJour, the generic concept of justification is "roughly that of a reason or warrant of some kind meeting some appropriate standard" (BonJour 1985, 5-6). The distinguishing feature of *epistemic* justification is "its essential or internal relation to the cognitive goal of truth" (BonJour 1985, 8). On my view this feature of epistemic justification is conceptually basic. It cannot be elucidated in terms of a frequency, propensity, or logical interpretation of probability for reasons mentioned above. As I see it, when deciding what to believe we are guided by our beliefs about what best

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<sup>23</sup> See also Goldman's remarks on Maximalism in Goldman (1979b)

achieves the truth goal. Sometimes, though, we make mistakes in this respect by failing to believe what, by our lights, best achieves the truth goal. What we fail to do is believe that which best stands in the internal relation to the cognitive goal of truth.

Given this conception of justification and the necessity of relying on our beliefs to make epistemic decisions, we can see how we have a right to rely on our beliefs. Bonjour writes that “one’s cognitive endeavors are epistemically justified only if and to the extent that they are aimed at this goal [i.e., the cognitive goal of truth]” (Bonjour 1985, 8). But the fact is that we must rely on our perspective to achieve this goal. When we are trying to figure out what we should believe, i.e., what fulfills the cognitive goal of truth, our perspective frames this choice. To put the point another way, which beliefs stand in the internal relation to the cognitive goal of truth is determined by our perspective. But for our beliefs to have this role they must have some (perhaps very small)<sup>24</sup> positive epistemic value. If this were false it’s hard to see how a subject has any right to rely on her perspective. But if this is correct then *mere belief* must be epistemically significant.

Let us examine three challenges to this argument, which also help to further clarify the argument. The first challenge disputes that the premises actually support conservatism. One might argue for this either along pragmatist lines, according to which even though a subject has a right to rely on her beliefs this doesn’t show that her beliefs have any positive epistemic value, or, along the lines of a pure coherentist that one has the right to rely on beliefs only because they are part of a coherent perspective. In either case, epistemic conservatism does not follow from the premises of the above argument.

Let us tackle the pragmatist position first. How exactly does the pragmatist line respond to this argument? The pragmatist claims that one has a right to rely on one’s beliefs because it is

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<sup>24</sup> See last paragraph of section 3.

the best prudential strategy available to a subject for attaining the truth goal. Given that a subject has various beliefs about the reliability and unreliability of belief-forming mechanisms, a subject has the best chances, by her lights, of achieving the truth-goal by relying on those beliefs. If she were to rely on other beliefs, then, by her own lights, she would do worse. The pragmatist contends that a subject has a prudential right to rely on her beliefs, but she lacks any epistemic right to regard her beliefs as likely to be true.<sup>25</sup> A variant on this pragmatist response is that the subject is rational to rely on her beliefs but not epistemically justified. Rationality is tied to a subject's perspective while epistemic justification must have a substantive connection to the truth.

In reply, this is a dubious application of the distinction between a prudential and epistemic right. The clearest cases in which these rights come apart are when it is in a subject's practical interest to believe something that is at odds with what her evidence indicates. If a subject learns that she has a disease and recovery is very improbable, it may still be in her prudential interest to believe she will recover because this increases the chance that she actually recovers. But the case concerning mere belief is not like this. In this case a subject believes *p* and *p* is not shown to be improbable by her evidence.

Let us focus on a subject's belief that her memory is reliable. I claim that a subject lacks any non-circular evidence to believe that memory is reliable.<sup>26</sup> This belief is a crucial part of a subject's perspective and determines for her which other beliefs are epistemically good. The pragmatist thinks that a subject has a prudential right, but not an epistemic right to believe that memory is reliable. Alternatively, the pragmatist may hold that a subject is rational to believe this, but isn't epistemically justified to believe that memory is reliable. But given the central role of memory for epistemic justification, this position implies a deep form of skepticism: any belief

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<sup>25</sup> This response was suggested by an anonymous reviewer

<sup>26</sup> See Alston (1986) and Bergmann (2004) for arguments that we lack non-circular evidence for the reliability of basic sources of belief.

that relies on memory is not epistemically justified. Moreover, it is difficult to understand *any sense* in which a subject is rational to believe anything if she has *absolutely* no epistemically justified beliefs. In contrast to this skeptical view, the conservative claims that our belief that memory is reliable has some initial epistemic merit by way of conservatism and this merit can be vindicated by the overall coherence of the resulting body of beliefs.

The other option for disputing that the premises actually support conservatism is to opt for a pure coherentist theory, according to which individual beliefs lack any positive epistemic value. Positive epistemic value is gained through coherence alone. This response, though, suffers from a standard objection to coherentism: logical and probabilistic relations by themselves do not provide justification.<sup>27</sup> Unless the data used for coherence reasoning has some initial plausibility, mere coherence cannot raise the probability of belief.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, a subject must have some justification for thinking that she has correctly identified her system of beliefs. If coherentism is plausible at all, a subject's beliefs themselves must have some initial credibility simply in virtue of being held.

The second challenge to the above argument is that a subject need not rely on her perspective to fulfill the primary epistemic goal. According to this objection, whether or not a subject fulfills the epistemic goal is a matter of how well the subject's beliefs fare with respect to the truth. If a subject's beliefs are largely true she is doing well and if they are largely false she is not doing well. In other words, it's wrong to think that a subject must guide her belief forming mechanisms to fulfill the truth goal.

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<sup>27</sup> For a good statement of this objection see Bonjour's discussion of the input objection in Bonjour (1985), 108. Bonjour now recognizes that this objection is fatal to pure coherentism. See Bonjour (1997) for details.

<sup>28</sup> See Olsson (2005) for a formal proof of this result.



This objection assumes an externalist conception of norm satisfaction. It assumes that as long as one's beliefs are mainly true then one is doing well epistemically. But this is false. A subject that gains a true belief by sheer luck doesn't thereby improve her epistemic standing. Similarly, a subject that acquires a new reliable belief forming mechanism by a burst of gamma radiation has not realized a *cognitive achievement*. She just got lucky. A long-standing tradition in epistemology has been to search for norms to guide our intellectual activity apropos deciding what to believe. The argument for conservatism above is framed within a commitment to internalistic norms for rational beliefs. The proposal is that *if one accepts the internalistic project* then one must rely on one's perspective to fulfill the main cognitive goal.

The third, and final, challenge to the argument for conservatism is that a subject doesn't have a *right* to rely on her perspective. This objection grants that a subject *must* rely on her perspective to guide her intellectual conduct, but if a subject's perspective has nothing going for it epistemically then the subject does not have a right to rely on it. What we need, according to this objection, is a reason for thinking that the subject's beliefs are justified. One can't assume that because the subject has no other options then the subject has a right to rely on *unjustified beliefs*.

In reply, the advocate of conservatism does not say that a subject has a right to rely on unjustified beliefs. The objector cannot assume that these beliefs are themselves unjustified or that they have nothing going for them from an epistemic perspective; that simply begs the question against conservatism. The conservative holds if a subject is in the special evidential state in which there is no evidence one way or other (and this includes evidence that would determine a unique prior probability as well) then if a subject believes she justifiedly believes. I've presented an argument for this from an internalist conception of justification, but the objector may want a more fundamental epistemic defense that these beliefs are justified without assuming

conservatism. But one can't be given. If it could then conservatism wouldn't be the fundamental epistemic principle it is claimed to be.

Let us take stock. We've seen that the anti-conservatism probability argument fails. Moreover, I have argued that conservatism receives support from the perspectival character of the truth goal. The objections to this argument either assume the falsity of internalistic norms or beg the question against conservatism. It remains to examine further challenges to conservatism that do not make these mistakes. In section 3 I examine the role of assertion and conservative justification. In section 4 I develop and respond to the guiding intuition that conservatism makes for bad epistemology. In the final section I examine the objections that conservatism provides an improper 'extra evidential boost' and that conservatism leads to 'conversion' objections.

### **3. Conservative Justification & Warranted Assertion**

Conservative justification seems odd. David Christensen writes,

The principle of epistemic conservatism takes many forms. But the basic idea behind it is simple: that an agent is in some measure justified in maintaining a belief simply in virtue of the fact that the agent has that belief. Thus an agent may, according to the conservative principle, correctly say 'I happen to believe it—and that is part of my justification for continuing to believe it!' (Christensen 1994, 69)

In this section I want to explain why conservatism does not have this alleged consequence. The key idea is one familiar to recent epistemology—assertion creates certain implicatures that can be misleading. In the case at hand, the assertion 'I believe p and that's part of my justification for it' violates the conversational maxim to make one's contribution relevant. In particular, this assertion creates the improper expectation that one's belief is *evidentially relevant* to the conversation at hand. I turn now to substantiate these points.

Since Grice's influential article "Logic and Conversation" it is widely recognized that pragmatic aspects of conversational contexts can generate false expectations. If you are interested in understanding the recent financial collapse and I say "I took an Economics course in college" that creates the (false) expectation that I can help you understand the recent financial collapse. In light of this aspect of conversational contexts, Grice conjectures that conversations are governed by the Cooperative Principle. This principle states: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice 2001, 167). Among the sub-maxims that flow from the Cooperative Principle is the maxim to make your contribution one that is relevant (Grice 2001, 168). In the above case, my assertion creates the expectation that it is relevant to my interlocutor's concern to understand the recent financial collapse.

Epistemological interest in the cooperative principle lies in its utility of offering a pragmatic explanation of mistaken epistemic intuitions. Consider, for instance, Dretske's Zebra Case (Dretske, 1972). You go to the zoo and see a pen marked "Zebra". You look, and at a close range, in good lighting, etc., is a striped equine animal. You thus believe that the animal is a zebra. Intuitively you know that it is a zebra. But do you know that the animal is not a cleverly disguised mule? We feel some pressure to say no. One way to explain away this pressure as misleading is to stress that it is improper to assert "That animal is not a cleverly disguised mule". The infelicity of this assertion, though, is compatible with knowing its content. The reason is that the assertion creates the *false* expectation that you have some *special* evidence that the animal is not a cleverly disguised mule. But you have no special evidence. Rather you rely on general background information about the way zoos work, the difficulty of disguising a mule, the lack of any apparent motivation to engage in such deception, etc., to knowingly believe that that animal isn't a cleverly disguised mule.

The significance of this lies within the fact that when one has *merely* conservative justification for  $p$ , one's conservative justification is unassertable. In any context in which the question of whether  $p$  is true is a live issue, our adherence to the cooperative principle makes one's belief that  $p$  entirely irrelevant to the discussion of whether  $p$  is true. In such contexts the assertion that 'I believe  $p$ ' creates the false expectation that one's *believing*  $p$  is relevant for the purposes at hand. This feature of conservatism explains why in challenged underdetermination cases it is wrong to *say* that one is justified in believing the view, even though one can remain justified in believing the theory.

This feature of conservatism is similar to attempts to minimize the strength of conservative justification. Many defenders of conservatism claim that the positive merit a content possesses via the conservative principle is very small. William Lycan, for instance, writes that the justification conferred by conservatism is vanishingly small: "only a credibility value of  $.5 + \epsilon$ , where  $\epsilon$  is vanishingly close to zero" (Lycan 1988, 171). This strikes me as the wrong way to explicate conservative epistemic merit. If the positive merit is merely infinitesimal then conservatism seems unlikely to help with any epistemic problems, e.g., the justification of memory beliefs or the justification of underdetermined theories. A better way to elucidate the idea that conservative epistemic merit is "small" is that in challenged contexts conservative justification is unassertable.

One objection to my appeal to Gricean norms is that pragmatic implicatures are cancelable and thus one should be able to assert 'I'm not implying that I have any special evidence but I believe that  $p$  and that's my justification for it.' Yet, it looks as if that's an admission that one lacks any justification for  $p$ .<sup>29</sup> The main problem with this objection is that the language of 'justification' is ambiguous between the state of being justified and the activity of

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<sup>29</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this objection.

justifying. When we give a justification we give an argument. It's natural to read this speech as offering an argument while saying that one isn't. The correct way to understand this speech is as offering a justification conferring condition. Perhaps, there is some oddity in offering a justification conferring condition when one knows that your interlocutor does not meet that condition. But there are other cases in which this makes sense. It is commonplace among mathematicians to maintain beliefs about unproved conjectures. Many mathematicians believed that Fermat's last theorem was provable before Andrew Wiles demonstrated that it's true. Mathematicians now widely regard Goldbach's conjecture as true, even though they explicitly recognize that the inductive evidence for conjectures like Goldbach's is neither here nor there. We can envision mathematicians saying something similar to the speech above: "I can maintain this belief even though I don't have any special evidence for it. I find myself believing that Goldbach's conjecture is true." So, in at least some cases, the relevant implicatures can be canceled without revoking one's justification.

#### **4. Conservatism & Autobiographical Epistemology**

Conservatism has been subject to multiple alleged counterexamples and more nuanced forms of argument.<sup>30</sup> A reply to each of these arguments and counterexamples is beyond the scope of this paper. What I aim to accomplish in this section is to uncover the essence of many objections to conservatism. We can accomplish this by examining David Christensen's interesting attempts to undermine conservatism.

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<sup>30</sup> See for instance Foley (1983), Vogel (1992), Christensen (1994) & (2000), Vahid (2004), and Fumerton (2008). As mentioned even defenders of conservatism are quick to distance themselves from the simple view that belief confers positive merit of its content. See for instance Sklar (1975), Kvanvig (1989), McGrath (2007), and McCain (2008).

Let us begin our discussion with one of Christensen's initial counterexamples to conservatism. Christensen describes the case as follows:

Suppose that my wife is pregnant, and I form the belief that the child she is carrying is a girl. But it's not that I caught a glimpse of it in the ultrasound picture, or that we have any family history of predominately female children, or that I believe myself to have mystic communion with the baby. I don't consider myself to have any justification for forming this belief; I simply form the belief capriciously, or perhaps on the basis of wishful thinking. In such a case, my belief does not reflect any learning on my part. And, naturally enough, in this case we do not have the intuition that the fact that I currently have the belief gives me reason to maintain it. (Christensen 2000, 355)

Even though Christensen says that this case seems to provide a counterexample to conservatism, he acknowledges that "the force of the example derives from evidence of defect in the agent's initial belief system" (Ibid). In this case one has evidence that one's belief was formed irrationally. Accordingly, the defender of conservatism might include a *ceteris paribus* clause to the effect that *absent reason to think one's belief is defective, belief confers some justification on its content*.

Christensen admits that the addition of this *ceteris paribus* clause leaves the conservative thesis motivated and more difficult to undermine by counterexample (Ibid., 355-56).

This point is significant. I want to stress this by examining one of Christensen's earlier alleged counterexamples to conservatism. Christensen describes the case of a scientist who holds a theory, T, which states that a certain class of diseases is caused by viruses. A new competing theory is formulated stating that the class of diseases is caused by environmental toxins. The scientist then acknowledges that the two theories are equally supported by the available evidence.<sup>31</sup> Christensen remarks that according to epistemic conservatism the scientist would be

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<sup>31</sup> See Christensen (1994), 82. This is a standard type of underdetermination case that occurs in the literature (see also Vogel (1992) & Feldman (2003), 143-4).

justified in giving more credence to T because it is believed. But, Christensen claims, this is wrong.<sup>32</sup>

In reply, this case should be handled similarly to the way that Christensen handles the other alleged counterexample to conservatism. When the new theory comes to light and it's acknowledged to be equally supported by the evidence this *can* indicate a defect in the scientist's original belief that T. If the scientist judges that her belief was not rationally formed then the *ceteris paribus* clause kicks in and belief ceases to confer some justification on its content.<sup>33</sup> The natural judgment that Christensen's case provides a counterexample to conservatism is explained by the fact that it tracks the *correct* judgment that underdetermination issues *can* lead one to think that one's initial belief is defective in some way. This judgment is consistent with the core conservative thesis. For the conservative thesis states that mere belief is a sufficient condition for positive epistemic merit. In the case in which one *additionally* thinks that one's belief is defective that creates some reason that detracts from the *original* merit possessed by the belief (hence one doesn't *merely believe it*). The net effect is a balancing out of epistemic considerations for that content, resulting in the content failing to be justified.

As we have seen, Christensen acknowledges that conservatism, properly understood, is not subject to straightforward counterexample; yet he continues to resist the core conservative idea. In an effort to locate the core objection to conservatism Christensen designs a case with the following conditions: "(1) coherence considerations aside, an agent has at her disposal an epistemically reasonable option for changing her beliefs, but (2) she does not also have evidence that her current beliefs are defective" (Christensen 2000, 357). Christensen notes that the search for such a case is difficult because "typically, situations in which it is reasonable to change one's

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<sup>32</sup> See Christensen (1994), 83.

<sup>33</sup> My formulation of conservatism uses *mere belief*, which, by the nature of mere belief, builds in the condition that there's no evidence against the belief.

beliefs involve having reasons to distrust one's present beliefs" (Ibid.). He thinks, though, that by engaging in some science fiction we can construct a case. He constructs the following *downloader case*.

Suppose that I have a serious lay interest in fish, and have a fairly extensive body of beliefs about them. At a party, I meet a professional ichthyologist. Although I of course believe that she shares the vast majority of my beliefs about fish, I know that she can probably set me straight about some ichthyological matters. However, I don't want to trouble her by asking a lot of work-related questions. Fortunately, I have a belief-downloader, which works as follows. If I turn it on, it scans both of our brains, until it finds some ichthyological proposition about which we disagree. It then replaces my belief with that of the ichthyologist, and turns itself off. (Christensen 2000, 357)

This case itself doesn't pose a threat to conservatism since there is a more reliable means of acquiring information (Ibid., 358). Christensen takes this case to be one of a range of cases in which the expertise factor varies. In this case the downloader would be used on an expert.

Christensen imagines another case in which one could use the downloader on someone that the evidence indicated was just as well informed as you. In this case Christensen says you should be *indifferent* to the downloader's use (Ibid). Christensen explains

My intuition... in the case where I have positive reason to believe the other agent equally reliable [is] ... that it is a matter of epistemic indifference. Of course, I'm taking a risk in using the downloader: my belief could be true and the stranger's belief could be false, in which case I'll end up with a false belief instead of a true one. But in the imagined case, I have no reason to believe that this is any more likely than the opposite possibility: that my belief is false and the stranger's belief is true. Thus, in declining to use the downloader, I would take an equivalent risk of ending up with the false belief rather than the true one. Given my information in this sort of case, the net epistemic expectation from using the downloader is for neither improvement nor diminishment. Thus, from an epistemic point of view, I have no reason to use, or refrain from using, the downloader. (Christensen 2000, 360)

Christensen has located a test case for conservatism. If Christensen is right that one should be indifferent to the downloader's use then one's beliefs carry *no positive epistemic merit*



*whatsoever*. But is this right?<sup>34</sup> One might reply that the use of the downloader will bring about synchronic incoherence in one's beliefs.<sup>35</sup> For instance, the downloader might replace one's belief that P with a belief that not-P even when P is heavily inferentially integrated within one's corpus of beliefs. This would produce fairly significant incoherence in one's new corpus of beliefs. Or the downloader's use may result in inscrutable belief change in which one recalls formerly believing p but now believes an incompatible proposition, q. This too is a type of synchronic incoherence. These problems may have more weight than Christensen gives to them, but let us bypass them to move on to Christensen's core objection to conservatism.

Christensen thinks the "ultimate problem" with conservatism is that "it accords importance to a factor that should be epistemically irrelevant: the identity of the agent having the initial beliefs" (Ibid., 363). He explains, "Diachronic coherence principles [conservative principles] insert autobiographical considerations into an enterprise whose proper concern is limited to *the detached pursuit of truth*" (Ibid). Moreover, he later complains that conservatism "gives credit for characteristics of belief that are irrelevant to the fundamental aim of accurate representation of the world" (Ibid., 364). This locates Christensen's *central* concern with conservatism. Moreover, in light of the key role the truth goal has played in epistemology and the widespread resistance to conservatism, it's not implausible that this worry lays at the center of many objections to conservatism. But, if this is right, a proper stress on the perspectival character of the truth goal removes this obstacle to conservatism. Rather than providing an argument against conservatism, reflection on the perspectival character of the truth goal provides a natural home for conservatism. Concerns about inserting autobiographical information (i.e., one's beliefs) into an enterprise whose proper concern is a subject's achieving true belief are

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<sup>34</sup> See McGrath (2007), 14-17 for an extended reply to Christensen.

<sup>35</sup> Christensen (2000) considers this reply on pp. 361-2.

unmotivated. Achieving true belief isn't something that permits a *detached* pursuit because as we've seen in section 2 above one must work within one's perspective. Consequently, the identity of the agent *is* crucial for achieving the truth goal.<sup>36</sup>

## 5. The 'Extra Boost' and Conversion objections

When I have presented this paper to various audiences, some philosophers continue to feel a deep dissatisfaction with conservatism. Perhaps these philosophers are drawn to externalism or to skepticism, but in discussion two objections stand out. The first objection is that conservatism is suspect because if it were true then belief itself could provide an 'extra boost' of confidence. The other objection is 'the conversion objection,' roughly the claim that a proposition that is irrational for a subject to accept could become justified merely by the fact that a subject comes to believe it. Matthew McGrath has addressed both of these objections in his worthwhile article 'Memory and epistemic conservatism.'<sup>37</sup> In general, my reply to these objections aligns with McGrath's discussion. However, there are some important differences. In the following I reply these two objections and, where necessary, improve upon McGrath's discussion.

### A. The "Extra Boost" Objection

Suppose your evidence for  $q$  is counterbalanced. You then realize that there's a sound argument for  $q$  from  $p$  and  $p \rightarrow q$ . You appropriately believe  $q$ . Your confidence in  $q$  should be

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<sup>36</sup> Another way to see that autobiographical information is epistemologically important is to focus on the non-defeater clause. Suppose two subjects believe that  $p$  on the basis of a reliable process and yet one believes that this process is not reliable whereas the other does not have this belief. Arguably, the latter can be justified in believing  $p$  while the former is not. Yet the only difference between the two is an autobiographical consideration: the former subject has some belief the other lacks.

<sup>37</sup> McGrath (2007).

bumped up to the appropriate level given your confidence in  $p$  and  $p \rightarrow q$ . Suppose this confidence level is .8. Now, if conservatism is true, it looks as if you have yet another reason to raise your confidence level in  $q$ —you believe  $q$ . Suppose it bumps you up to .85. But this ‘extra boost’ of confidence is inappropriate.

In reply, the objection is mistaken that *in the presence of good evidence for a claim* belief provides some *extra evidence* for its content. Conservatism, recall, is the thesis that *mere belief* is a source of justification. Mere belief is the state of believing  $p$  *in the absence of any good evidence for it and in the absence of any good evidence against it*. Sklar remarks that conservatism is “applied as a means of ‘last resort’ when the other principles fail to motivate a decision for us” (Sklar 1975, 375). The key for understanding conservatism is that mere belief itself can generate justification, but this does not require that belief provides extra evidence for some claim.

This crucial ‘last resort’ feature of epistemic conservatism leads to another objection. Granted belief does not provide an extra boost because belief is relevant only in the very special evidential situation in which one lacks evidence for the content of the belief, but it now looks as if one can acquire positive evidence for  $p$  but decrease one’s overall justification for  $p$ . If one is in the state of merely believing  $p$  but then one acquires weak evidence for  $p$  then it looks like the appropriate response is to believe  $p$  to the degree one’s evidence now warrants and that may well be less than one’s original conservative justification.<sup>38</sup>

Two points undermine this objection. First, the objection is committed to false precision about epistemic justification. The objection requires that there is a real number,  $n$ , that gives the level of justification one has via conservatism, and another number,  $m$ , that gives the positive level of justification one has by the weak evidence, and that  $m < n$ . For reasons pertaining to Lycan’s attempt to explicate conservative justification via a credibility of  $.5 + \epsilon$ , I doubt that one

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<sup>38</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this worry.

can think of conservative justification as providing some specific level of credence given by some real number. However, if one goes Lycan's route then it's doubtful that there's room between .5 and  $.5 + \epsilon$  to run this objection.

Second, Bayesianism implies that sometimes acquiring positive evidence for  $p$  can decrease one's overall justification for  $p$ . Suppose one has good grounds for believing that it's a natural law that *all Fs are Gs*. One thus has good grounds for believing that *all Fs are either Gs or Hs*. But then one acquires evidence that some F is an H. This is positively relevant to the proposition that *all Fs are either Gs or Hs*, but it decreases one's overall justification for that claim. Why? Because one learns that some Fs are not Gs but Hs. And thus one may well think that there can be Fs that are neither Gs or Hs. One acquires positive evidence that the law one previously thought is not a law and thus there's no a law-like connection between Fs and Gs. Given your evidence now, you no longer have good grounds for supposing that anything that is not a G or H is not an F. Similarly, with conservative justification if one acquires positive evidence then the principle of 'last resort' no longer applies and definite evidential considerations come into play. Thus, this present objection fails.

### *B. Conversion objections*

The conversion objection is that conservatism may improperly change the epistemic situation of a subject. Richard Foley considers two subjects, S and T, in the same sort of epistemic situation except for the difference that S believes  $h$  and T withholds on  $H$ . In this situation, Foley stipulates, it is just barely more rational for T to withhold on  $h$  than for T to believe  $h$ . He then asks: is it acceptable for S to believe  $h$ ?<sup>39</sup> Foley invites us to answer no.

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<sup>39</sup> (Foley (1983), 176).

David Christensen<sup>40</sup> offers the similar case of a scientist whose evidence is counterbalanced apropos theory R and who does not believe theory R. In this situation it would be irrational for the scientist to believe R. The scientist comes across an experimental result that tips the balance of evidence in favor of R and she now rationally believes R. Later, though, the scientist comes to learn that this evidence was fabricated. The scientist, however, continues to believe R, perhaps because she forgot that her sole reason for accepting it had been undermined. Importantly, though, it looks like her epistemic situation is the same as it was before she had the experiential result and thus her belief is irrational.

Both of these putative counterexamples involve cases in which a claim is counterbalanced by the evidence and then by conversion a subject comes to rationally believe the claim.<sup>41</sup> The alleged counterintuitive result to conservatism is that it implies that belief can change the epistemic situation so that the believed content is now rational to believe whereas formerly it was not. This is a forceful challenge to conservatism because as Foley observes “all conservative positions will imply that *simply* by being believed a proposition acquires *some* kind of favorable epistemic status which in *some* way alters what is required to make that proposition or some other propositional rational for the person to regard as true” (Foley 1983, 179). Apart from this feature conservatism will be unable to perform the job it is designed to perform: i.e., address underdetermination worries, concerns about memorial justification, etc. So it is incumbent on the conservative to clearly answer this worry.

Matthew McGrath’s treatment of this objection is to expand the range of defeating conditions to handle these counterexamples. He considers the case of forming a belief using the

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<sup>40</sup> Personal conversation.

<sup>41</sup> Christensen’s case involves the loop through undermined evidence. The point of Christensen’s counterexample, though, is that conversion to theory R is doing the allegedly improper epistemic work after the evidence is undermined.

gambler's fallacy. Even though the subject may not realize that her belief is formed on this basis, she has all the materials available to realize that her belief is not held rationally (McGrath 2007, 18). As applied to Christensen's case the idea is that the subject has the materials available to realize that her sole reason for accepting theory **R** is gone. On McGrath's view this amounts to a defeater for the subject and so one doesn't possess conservative justification for the claim.

McGrath's treatment requires a liberal view of defeaters. On McGrath's view a subject has a defeater for her belief as long as the materials for the defeater are "constructible from within the subject's perspective" (Ibid). What is it to be 'constructible'? McGrath says that it should be understood "in terms ... of the simple exercise of properly functioning human cognitive capacities" (Ibid). But here a challenge arises. If a subject *merely believes p*, i.e., has no positive evidence for *p* and no evidence against *p*, does the subject possess a defeater for *p*, i.e., *p* is believed for no good reason? If so, then conservatism is false; whenever a subject merely believes *p* she will always have a defeater for her belief and thus she will never be justified in believing *p*.

The general contour of a conservative response is obvious: in the problematic cases a subject has a defeater for her belief, but in the good cases she doesn't have a defeater.<sup>42</sup> The problem is to provide a principle for drawing that distinction. McGrath doesn't provide a principle, remarking that his proposal is 'a first start' (Ibid). In the following, I aim to strengthen McGrath's initial answer by providing a principle to draw this distinction. The principle I offer is one that is deeply conservative. It is a principle that appeals, on the one hand, to the strength of some skeptical reasoning to change our beliefs and yet, on the other hand, to the weakness of other skeptical arguments to affect our confidence. Sometimes, skeptical arguments shake our confidence; other times, skeptical arguments are completely ineffectual. The principle is this: if a

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<sup>42</sup> As McGrath says, see Ibid., 19.

subject merely believes  $p$  and is unmoved by epistemological maneuvering then the subject does not have a defeater for her belief. What is ‘epistemological maneuvering’? Roughly, it is the use of skeptical reasoning, reasoning about underdetermination issues, or reasoning from disagreement. This list is not intended to be exhaustive; rather it gives prominent examples of epistemological arguments designed to indicate a defect in the subject’s belief. The claim that the conservative should adopt is that the distinction between the good cases and the problematic cases lies in our ability to be moved by broadly skeptical arguments.

I want to put some flesh on this proposal by briefly examining our response to Goodman’s riddle of induction. I don’t intend to engage in a drawn out discussion of this riddle; rather I want to focus on our reaction to Goodman’s puzzle. I will assume some familiarity with Goodman’s discussion.<sup>43</sup> In the course of discussing the old problem of justifying induction, Goodman observes that Hempel’s criterion of converse implication (i.e., the hypothesis must entail the evidence) holds promise for answering the old problem of justifying induction. But Goodman remarks that new problems arise. The problem Goodman presses is that by using Hempel’s criterion one gets the unacceptable result that any statement confirms any other statement. Goodman considers the inference from a positive instance (there is a green emerald) to the hypothesis that all emeralds are green. By Hempel’s criterion, the hypothesis entails that this emerald is green and so provides confirmation for the hypothesis. However, Goodman remarks that we could describe this evidential situation differently using the predicate ‘grue’ which applies to things examined before  $t$  just in case they are green and to other things just in case they are blue (Goodman 1955, 74). In this case the positive instance of a green emerald at  $t$  confirms the hypothesis that all emeralds are grue. Goodman remarks that if we are careful in

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<sup>43</sup> See Goodman (1955), chapters 3 & 4.

choosing an appropriate predicate we get “the intolerable result that anything confirms anything” (Ibid., 75).

Now plainly no one is moved to think that the statement *all emeralds are grue* is equally confirmed as the statement *all emeralds are green*. Goodman’s new riddle of induction does nothing to shake our confidence that the green hypothesis stands out as the favored and most confirmed hypothesis given the data. Even though Goodman’s riddle appeals to underdetermination worries, these worries are completely ineffectual to indicate a real defect in our belief that the green hypothesis is true. We treat the grue hypothesis as contrived, peculiar, and bizarre. It is dismissed out of hand as soon as it is proposed.<sup>44</sup>

This feature of Goodman’s riddle is one it shares with many other skeptical arguments. In my experience people are entirely unmoved by the Cartesian possibility of an evil demon or the possibility that they are a brain in a vat.<sup>45</sup> These possibilities do nothing to shake our confidence in the claims they are designed to undermine, e.g., I know I have hands. Similarly, general underdetermination worries like Hume’s original problem of induction fail to indicate a real defect in our inductive practices. People continue to judge that there is nothing amiss with their inductive beliefs. These skeptical cases are useful for epistemology, but, as Hume observes, the force of skeptical reasoning is quickly forgotten.<sup>46</sup> The conservative can utilize this feature of some skeptical arguments to motivate a distinction between the good cases and the bad cases. The bad cases are ones in which epistemological maneuvering has the power to shake our

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<sup>44</sup> Of course, this is not to say that Goodman’s new riddle fails to be interesting for epistemological purposes. The primary purpose of Goodman’s new riddle of induction was to show that our inductive practices are dependent upon our language. This affects Carnap’s project of attempting to justify induction by way of a probability function over state descriptions. Goodman’s grue problem shows that the choice of a language is epistemically significant for induction and can’t be modeled by a probability function.

<sup>45</sup> For a similar remark see Sosa (2007), 2.

<sup>46</sup> See Hume *Treatise* 1.4.2.



confidence and the good cases are ones in which epistemological maneuvering fails to indicate any real defect in our beliefs.

A favorable consequence of this is that it leaves a substantial conservative doctrine without running roughshod over legitimate skeptical concerns. As many commentators have observed, it is difficult to balance legitimate evidential concerns with the power of the conservatism thesis. McGrath provides a useful first step for this balancing act by focusing on defeaters that are constructible from a subject's perspective. This first step may be extended by adding a view about when such defeaters are present. On the view I have provided, defeaters for conservative justification are available when epistemological maneuvering has the power to move us. But when we merely believe *p* and we are not moved by epistemological arguments then no defeaters are constructible within our perspective.<sup>47</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Conservatism is an important epistemological doctrine. Anyone attracted to a non-skeptical internalist epistemology must come to grips with the ineliminable role of belief in guiding our intellectual conduct. Following Neurath's famous metaphor, our intellectual conduct is a raft that we rebuild at sea. We seek to continuously improve the raft by adding and subtracting new material but we must always stand on some existing timber. I have articulated a

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<sup>47</sup> A referee objected that this principle seems wrong because one may be pigheaded and thereby keep one's conservative justification. In reply, this objection seems erroneous for two reasons. First, a pigheaded person may not be in the evidential situation of mere belief because she very well may have plenty of defeaters for her belief; e.g., she is ignoring evidence that obviously indicates her belief is false or her position is incoherent. Second, often a pigheaded person genuinely recognizes the force of the arguments against her position but refuses to admit it. On my view, an obstinate person no longer has justification for her beliefs because she is moved by the epistemological considerations even though she won't own up to it. This case is crucially different from the case of a person that is entirely unmoved by underdetermination arguments.

key rationale for thinking that our inability to escape reliance on our own beliefs shouldn't lead to skepticism.

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