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HOW ARE OBJECTIVE EPISTEMIC REASONS POSSIBLE?¹

INTRODUCTION

Epistemic relativism has the contemporary academy in its grip. Not merely in the United States, but seemingly everywhere, most scholars working in the humanities and the social sciences seem to subscribe to some form of it. Even where the label is repudiated, the view is embraced. Sometimes the relativism in question concerns truth, sometimes justification. The core impulse appears to be a relativism about *knowledge*. The suspicion is widespread that what counts as knowledge in one cultural, or broadly ideological, setting need not count as knowledge in another.

While it is true that these views are often very poorly laid out and argued for, I found myself surprised, on reflection, at the extent to which a relativism about justification – as opposed to one concerning truth – may be seen to be a natural, if ultimately ill-advised, response to a real problem. For there is a serious difficulty seeing how there could be objectively valid reasons for belief, a difficulty that has perhaps not been adequately faced up to in the analytic tradition.

In this essay, I aim to explain what the problem is; to say why relativism, and its sophisticated cousin, non-factualism, are unpalatable solutions to it; and to try to point the way forward.

I

The Problem

I take it for granted that we aim to have true beliefs and that we attempt to satisfy that aim by having *justified* beliefs. Let us represent a thinker as possessing a certain set of beliefs and a certain set of rules – epistemic rules – that specify how to modify those



beliefs in response to incoming evidence. An example of such a rule may be:

(ER1) If lighting conditions are good, etc, and it visually seems to you as if there is a cat in front of you, then believe that there is a cat in front of you.

Another example:

(ER2) If you are justified in believing that p, and justified in believing that ‘If p, then q’, then believe q or give up one of the other beliefs.

By saying that a thinker has and operates according to these rules I don’t mean that the thinker grasps these rules as propositions. I mean that he *follows* these rules, and that this shows up in his behavior, however exactly that is to be analyzed. It will do no harm, for present purposes, to think of rule-following as a disposition to rule-conform under appropriately idealized circumstances.²

Now, epistemic rules are rules and as such make no claims. They are rules of obligation governing belief. But the point of saying that we aim to have justified beliefs is to say that their function is to so modify belief that what results from their application is always a justified belief in the circumstances. In adopting (ER1) as our rule of belief modification, in other words, we are implicitly committed to the truth of a corresponding *epistemic principle*:

(EP1) If S is in good lighting conditions and etc, then if it visually appears to S that there is an x in front of him, then S would be *prima facie* justified in believing that there is an x in front of him.³

Similarly for (ER2):

(EP2) If S is justified in believing p and is justified in believing ‘If P then q’, and S infers q from those premises, then S is *prima facie* justified in believing q.

Against this backdrop, the thesis of the objectivity of reasons can be stated as the claim that there is an objective fact of the matter which epistemic principles are true, and, consequently, which sets of rules a thinker ought to employ to shape his beliefs, if he is to arrive at beliefs that are genuinely justified.

We certainly act as though we believe in the objectivity of reasons. We don’t behave as though anything goes in the way of belief, suggesting that we operate with a specific set of epistemic

rules. And we don't hold that others are at liberty to operate with whatever epistemic rules they like.

The problem for the objectivity of reasons can now be stated succinctly, in the form of the following *reductio*:

1. Assume that there are objective facts about which epistemic principles are true.
2. If there are objective facts about which epistemic principles are true, these facts should be knowable: it ought to be possible to arrive at justified beliefs about them.
3. It is not possible to know which epistemic principles are objectively true, therefore
4. There are no objective facts about which epistemic principles are true.

The Second Premise

This is not the strong and implausible claim that, if S is to know anything, he must know the underlying epistemic principles to which he is committed. To learn by observation that there is a cat in front of me does not require me first to know that observation justifies perceptual beliefs.

It is rather the much weaker claim that, if there are objective facts about epistemic principles are true, there should be humanly accessible circumstances under which those facts can be known. And this much weaker claim seems to me almost not to require argument. If there are such facts, why should they be in principle unknowable?

My claim here does not stem from a generalized verificationism: for any fact, if it is to obtain, it must be knowable. I am perfectly happy to admit that there might be facts about the world that are not accessible to creatures such as ourselves. What I don't see is how this could apply to the sort of epistemic fact currently under consideration. There is no intuitive sense in which such epistemic facts are analogous to evidence-transcendent or undecidable facts of a more familiar variety – those four consecutive sevens in the decimal expansion of pi, for example. Rather, what is at issue are facts of the form encoded in (EP1) and (EP2). It would be peculiar, to say the least, if truths of this type were in principle unknowable. It would certainly be peculiar for us to *suppose* that they are unknowable. For

in what could our confidence that there are such facts consist, if we simultaneously take it that we cannot know what they are?

Prima facie, indeed, a much stronger claim seems plausible: not merely that these facts are knowable, but that they are, at least in large measure, *known*. For are we seriously to suppose that we don't know what it takes to justify a belief or a claim? If we don't, should we not be far more diffident about putting forward any claim, including the claim that we don't know which epistemic principles are true? Although, as I have conceded, it does not logically follow from S's knowing something that he knows which epistemic principles are true, it does seem to be true that, if S is a sufficiently *self-conscious* knower, he must *assume* that he knows which epistemic principles are true. So there is at least something pragmatically problematic about claiming that we don't know, and can't know, which epistemic principles are true.

A further source of support for the claim that we know comes from the nearly universal agreement about which epistemic principles are true. With the exception of certain postmodern thinkers – and in their case they merely pretend to believe otherwise – nearly everyone agrees that observation generates justification for certain sorts of belief and that deductively valid inferences transmit the justification attaching to their premises to their conclusions. What better explanation could there be for this practically universal agreement than that there are objective facts about what the correct principles are and that these facts are relatively obvious?

If we wished we could go further and plausibly claim not only that these facts are known, but that they are known *a priori*. For we don't seem to have learnt from experience that deductively valid arguments transmit justification, nor it seems, could we have.⁴

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this argument, I will rely only on the weaker claim that, if there are correct epistemic principles, they are knowable.

The Third Premise

Why should there be any difficulty in knowing which they are? Having emphasized how widely known they seem to be, how do we now contrive a difficulty about knowing them in the first place? Unfortunately, it is not too difficult to say what the problem is.

Let's concentrate, for now, on deductive reasoning. As I said, we modify our beliefs according to:

(ER2) If you are justified in believing that p , and justified in believing that 'If p , then q ', then you should either believe q or give up one of the other beliefs.

In subscribing to ER2, we are evincing our acceptance of the rule of inference *modus ponens*:

(MPPR) $p, q \rightarrow q / q$.

Some might choose to regard acceptance of MPPR as simply *consisting* in an acceptance of ER2; others might prefer to regard MPPR as the more basic and hence as *leading* to an acceptance of ER2. It won't matter for my purposes how the relation between these rules is conceived.

In the interests of keeping matters as simple as possible, yet us restrict ourselves to propositional logic and let us suppose that we are working within a system in which MPPR is the only *fundamental*, underived, rule of inference. In that case, S's fundamental transmission principle becomes our familiar:

(EP2) If S is justified in believing p and is justified in believing 'If P then q ', and S infers q from those premises, then S is *prima facie* justified in believing q .

And this principle will in turn be true provided that a certain logical fact obtains, namely:

(MPP) $p, p \rightarrow q$ imply q .

Now, if S is to know that his fundamental transmission principle is true, he must, at a minimum, be justified in believing that MPP is true. So our question about the knowability of epistemic principles becomes: Is it possible for S to be justified in believing that all arguments of the form *modus ponens* are necessarily truth-preserving?⁵ (I am not at the moment concerned with how thinkers such as ourselves are *actually* justified, but only with whether it makes sense to suppose that we could be.)

When we look at the available options, however, it seems hard to see how we could be justified in believing something as basic as

MPP. For in what could such a justification consist? It would have to be either inferential or non-inferential. And there look to be serious problems of principle standing in the way of either option.

Non-Inferential Justification

For us to be non-inferentially justified in believing something we would have to be justified in believing it either on the basis of some sort of observation or on the basis of nothing.

But what sort of observation could possibly serve as the basis for the belief that all arguments of the form MPP are truth-preserving? Henry Kyburg has given voice to a temptation that we must all have felt at some point:

I think that in some sense . . . our justification of deductive rules must ultimately rest, in part, on an element of deductive intuition: we *see* that *modus ponens* is truth-preserving – that is simply the same as to reflect on it and fail to see how it can lead us astray.⁶

It is possible to discern two distinct thoughts in this short passage, although Kyburg seems to want to equate them. One is that we can simply *see* that MPP is truth-preserving. The other is that, try as we might, we cannot see any way in which it could fail us.

Neither thought seems particularly helpful. As for the first thought, in any sense of ‘see’ that I can make sense of, we cannot just *see* that MPP is valid. To be sure, the idea that we possess a quasi-perceptual faculty – going by the name of “rational intuition” – the exercise of which is supposed to give us direct insight into necessary truths has been historically influential. It would be fair to say, however, that no one has succeeded in saying what this faculty really is nor how it manages to yield the relevant knowledge. “Intuition,” or “clear and distinct perception,” seem like names for the mystery we are addressing, rather than solutions to it.⁷

As for the second thought, when we say that we cannot see or conceive a counterexample to some general claim – for example, to the claim that all arguments of the form *modus ponens* are truth-preserving – we cannot plausibly mean that we have some direct, non-ratiocinative ability to detect whether such an example exists. The only thing we can legitimately mean is that a more or less elementary piece of *reasoning* shows that there cannot be any such counterexample. The “reflecting” on the matter that

Kyburg mentions is mediated by reasoning. We think: A conditional statement is true provided that if its antecedent is true so is its consequent. Suppose, then, that a particular conditional statement is true and that so is its antecedent. Then it simply has to be the case that its consequent is true. Hence, there can be no counterexample.

Talk of “conceiving” and “seeing” here are just thin disguises for a certain familiar style of logical reasoning. This is not, of course, to condemn it. But it is to emphasize that its acceptability as an epistemology for *logic* turns on the acceptability of an inferential account more generally.

Default Reasonable Beliefs

But perhaps it is a mistake to think that some positive act of observation or imagining is required, if a belief is to be justified non-inferentially. According to an increasingly influential line of thought, certain beliefs are simply ‘default reasonable,’ reasonable in and of themselves, without any supporting justification from either observation or argument. In particular, the fundamental logical beliefs have this feature.⁸ It is reasonable to believe them, but *not* because there is some positive *ground* by virtue of which they are reasonable. If believed, they are reasonably believed, period.

I am not implacably opposed to the idea that there might be beliefs that are reasonable on the basis of nothing, especially if this is understood to mean simply that they are beliefs that are *presumptively but defeasibly justified*. It is possible that this will prove to be the best description of the epistemology of our first-person knowledge of the contents of our own minds. What I don’t see, however, is how this idea could plausibly apply to the case at hand, to the *generalization* that all inferences of a certain form are necessarily truth-preserving.

If the notion of default reasonableness is to play a significant role in the theory of knowledge, there has to be some principled way of saying which beliefs are default reasonable and why. What is needed, in other words, is a *criterion* for determining whether a belief qualifies for that status and an *explanation* for why satisfaction of that criterion is sufficient for it. Which beliefs are default reasonable and what is it about them that gives them this special standing? This insistence does not contravene the root idea that, in

the case of a default reasonable belief, there is no *ground* that makes it reasonable; for it is consistent with a belief's having that status that there be a criterion by virtue of which it has that status and an explanation for why it has it.

The trouble with default reasonable beliefs is that there do not seem to be very many plausible answers to these questions: it is hard to see what condition could plausibly qualify a belief for default reasonable status.

One idea that might seem initially promising concerns the class of self-fulfilling beliefs: beliefs that are such that, having them guarantees that they are true. Surely these beliefs count as default reasonable if any do. Tyler Burge has discussed such beliefs in connection with the phenomenon of authoritative self-knowledge. For example, the belief – With this very thought I am thinking that water is wet – looks to be self-fulfilling: thinking it logically guarantees its truth.⁹

It would, however, be a mistake to think that being logically self-confirming is sufficient for default reasonableness. A guarantee of truth is not in itself a guarantee of reasonableness; and it is reasonableness that's at issue. What is missing from a merely self-confirming thought is some knowledge, however trivial, on the part of the thinker that the thought *is* self-confirming. But such knowledge would transform the source of the reasonableness to an inference based on that knowledge and we would now no longer have anything that is reasonable by default.

A second thought, more directly connected to the thinker's justification, has it that a default reasonable belief is any belief which, by virtue of being presupposed in any justification that a thinker might give, is neither justifiable nor refutable for that thinker. But this suggestion has two implausible consequences. First, it entails that what is default reasonable has to be relativized to individual thinkers, for different thinkers may build their epistemic systems around different claims. Second, it has the consequence that some very implausible claims would come out as default reasonable for someone if they happened to be presupposed by that person's epistemic system. For example, suppose that someone takes as basic the *negation* of the law of non-contradiction; on this view, we would have to say that the negation of that law is default reasonable

for him, because, by assumption, it will be neither justifiable nor refutable for that person.

A third suggestion has it that the beliefs that are default reasonable are those beliefs that a thinker finds “self-evident” – that is, that he is disposed to find plausible simply on the basis of understanding them and without any further support or warrant. But this proposal, too, would seem to be subject to the previous two objections. Once again, it is entirely possible that two people will find very different propositions “self-evident,” and that some of those will include propositions that are intuitively highly implausible.

Nor would it help to strengthen the requirement so that it concerns those beliefs that actually *are* self-evident, as opposed to those that merely *seem* self-evident. Here the problem is that no one seems to me to have shown how this notion is to be spelled out. In particular, no one has supplied a criterion for distinguishing those propositions that *are* self-evident from those that – like the parallel postulate in Euclidean geometry or the proposition that life cannot be reduced to anything biological – merely *seemed* self-evident to many people for a very long time.

By contrast, there is one form of explanation that seems to me have some promise. There may be beliefs that are such that, having those beliefs is a condition for having one of the concepts ingredient in them. Thus, Christopher Peacocke has written of a special case

... in which it is written into the possession conditions for one or more concepts in [a] given principle that to possess those concepts, the thinker must be willing to accept the principle, by reaching it in [a particular] way.¹⁰

The special case that Peacocke has in mind concerns our belief in the validity of the basic truths of deduction. Under the terms of our assumptions, then, the idea would be that it is written into the possession conditions for conditional, that to possess it a thinker would have to believe that all arguments of the form MPP are truth-preserving.

If this were true, then, it seems to me, it would be correct to say that the belief that MPP is truth-preserving is default reasonable. For if it really were part of the possession condition for a given concept that to possess it one had to believe a certain proposition containing it, then that would explain why belief in that proposition is presumptively but defeasibly justified. If it really were a

precondition for being able to so much as *entertain* any thought involving the concept *phlogiston* that one *believe* that phlogiston is a substance, then it would seem to me right to say that the belief that phlogiston is a substance is presumptively reasonable, subject to defeat by other considerations. It seems wrong to call the belief in question unreasonable when having it is a precondition for having any thoughts about it – including thoughts about its reasonableness.

Unfortunately, it is not remotely plausible that anyone possessing the concept of conditional would have to have the *belief* that MPP is valid. One can have and reason with conditional without so much as having the concept of logical implication. At most what the theory of concept possession would license is that *inferring* according to MPPR is part of the possession condition for conditional, not the *belief* that MPP is valid. But what we are after now is the justification for the belief. (Henceforth, to avoid unnecessary prolixity, I will drop the distinction between the labels, ‘MPP’ and ‘MPPR’. I will talk simply about the difference between believing that MPP is valid and reasoning according to MPP.)

Inferential Justification: Rule-Circularity

This brings us, then, to the inferential path. Here there are a number of distinct possibilities, but they would all seem to suffer from the same master difficulty: in being inferential, they would have to be *rule-circular*. If MPP is the only underived rule of inference, then any inferential argument for MPP would either have to use MPP or use some other rule whose justification depends on MPP. And many philosophers have worried, legitimately, that a rule-circular justification of a rule of inference is no justification at all.

Thus, it is tempting to suppose that we can give an *a priori* justification for modus ponens on the basis of our knowledge of the truth-table for ‘if, then’. Suppose that p is true and that ‘if p, then q’ is also true. By the truth-table for ‘if, then’, if p is true and if ‘if p, then q’ is true, then q is true. So q must be true, too. As is clear, however, this justification for MPP must itself take at least one step in accord with MPP.

But why should this be considered a problem? While it may be immediately obvious that a grossly circular justification – one that includes among its premises that which it is attempting to prove

– is worthless it is not equally obvious that the same is true of a merely rule-circular justification. What intuitive constraint on justification does a rule-circular justification violate? It will be useful to approach this question by looking first at what is wrong with a grossly circular justification and to examine subsequently to what extent these problems afflict mere rule-circularity as well.

There are at least two things wrong with a grossly circular argument. First, it assumes that which it is trying to prove and that, quite independently of any further consequences, seems wrong. An argument is put forward with the intent of justifying – earning the right to believe – a certain claim. But it will only do so if it proceeds from premises that are justified. If, however, the premise is also the conclusion, then it is simply helping itself to the claim that the conclusion is justified, instead of earning the right to it. And this maneuver offends against the very idea of proving something or arguing for it. As we are prone to say, it begs the question.

A second problem is that by allowing itself the liberty of assuming that which it is trying to prove, a grossly circular argument is able to prove absolutely anything, however intuitively unjustifiable. Let us call the first problem the problem of “begging the question” and the second that of “bad company.”¹¹ Is a merely rule-circular justification subject to the same or analogous worries?

It is not obvious that a rule-circular argument begs the question, for what we have is an argument that is circular only in the sense that, in purporting to prove the validity of a given logical law, it must take at least one step in accordance with that law. And it is not immediately clear that we should say that an argument relies on its implicated rule of inference in the same way as we say that it relies on its premises.

Well, perhaps not in the *same* way, but it is not difficult to motivate a worry on this score. One clear way of doing so is to look at the role that a rule-circular argument might play in a dialectical context in which it is being used to silence a *sketpic's* doubt about its conclusion.

Suppose that you doubt some claim *C* and I am trying to persuade you that it's true. I offer you an argument *A* in its support. In general, in such a context, you could question *A's* cogency either by questioning one of its premises or by questioning the implicated rule of

inference R. If you were to proceed by challenging R, then I would have to defend R and my only option would appear to be to try to defend my *belief* that R is truth-preserving.

Now suppose that the context in question is the special case where C is the proposition that R is truth-preserving and my argument for C is rule-circular in that it employs R in one of its steps. Here it very much looks as if I have begged the question: I have certainly begged *your* question. You doubt MPP. I give you an argument in support of MPP that uses MPP. Alert enough to notice that fact, you question my argument by reiterating your doubts about MPP. I defend my argument by asserting that MPP is truth-preserving. In this dialectical sense, a rule-circular argument might be said to beg the question.

At a minimum, then, the skeptical context discloses that a rule-circular argument for MPP would beg a skeptic's question about MPP and would, therefore, be powerless to quell his doubts about it. In doing this, however, it reveals yet another sense in which a worry might arise about a rule-circular argument. An argument relies on a rule of inference. As the skeptical scenario highlights, one's reliance on such a rule might be questioned. But, quite apart from whether it is questioned, in what does one's entitlement to rely on that rule consist, if not in one's entitlement to the *belief* that the rule is truth-preserving? And if it does consist in that, how can a rule-circular argument in support of belief in MPP confer warrant on its conclusion? In relying on a step in accord with MPP, in the course of an argument for MPP, one would be leaning on the very conclusion one is allegedly trying to prove.

Under the general heading of a worry about begging the question, then, I want to distinguish two problems: First, to say in what the entitlement to use a rule of inference consists, if not in one's justified belief that that rule is truth-preserving. Second, to say how a rule-circular argument can confer warrant on its conclusion even if it is powerless to move the relevant skeptic.

What about the problem of bad company? Prima facie, anyway, there looks to be a big difference between a grossly circular argument, on the one hand, and a rule-circular argument on the other, so far as their potential to positively rationalize belief is concerned. A grossly circular argument is guaranteed to succeed, no matter

what proposition it is attempting to rationalize. A similar charge could not be made against a merely rule-circular argument: the mere license to use an inferential step in accord with modus ponens, for example, does not *in and of itself guarantee* that a given argument will succeed in demonstrating the validity of modus ponens. Appropriate premises from which, by (as it might be) a single application of MPP, we can get the general conclusion that MPP is truth-preserving, may simply not exist. In general, it is a non-trivial fact that a given rule of inference is self-supporting in this way.

While this point is strictly correct, however, the fact is that unless constraints are placed on the acceptability of rule-circular arguments, it will nevertheless be true that we will be able to justify all manner of absurd rules of inference. We must confront the charge that unconstrained rule-circular justifications keep bad company.

Consider someone who has somehow come to adopt the unreflective practice of inferring according to Prior's introduction and elimination rules for the 'tonk' connective:

(I) A/A tonk B; (E) A tonk B/B

If we suppose that we are allowed to *use* inferences in accord with these rules in mounting a justification for them, then it would seem that we could justify them as follows:¹²

'P tonk Q' is true iff 'P' is true tonk 'Q' is true	Meaning Postulate
P	Assumption
'P' is true	2, T-scheme
'P' is true tonk 'Q' is true	3, tonk-introduction
'P tonk Q' is true	4, 1, biconditional-elimination
P tonk Q	5, T-scheme
If P, then P tonk Q	6, logic

Here line 7 expresses a canonical statement of tonk-introduction dependent just on the meaning postulate in line 1. So this template is available to explain how someone for whom inference in accordance with tonk introduction was already part of their unreflective practice could arrive at an explicit justification for it. And an exactly corres-

ponding example could be constructed to yield a “justification” for the principle of tonk-elimination.

Or consider the following example.¹³ Let R^* be the rule that, for any P , P , *therefore* All snow is white. Now, we seem to be in a position to mount a justification for it along the following lines. Pick any proposition P :

1. P	Assumption
2. All snow is white	1, R^*
3. If P , then All snow is white	Conditional Weakening

Therefore, the inference from P to all snow is white is truth-preserving. Since this is independent of the particular proposition P that is chosen, then, for any proposition P , the inference from P to ‘All snow is white’ is truth-preserving’, i.e., R^* is valid.

Prima facie, then, there look to be serious objections to supposing that a rule-circular justification can confer any sort of warrant on its conclusion.

How to Respond?

If the preceding considerations are correct, it’s a serious question how there could be objectively correct deductive transmission principles. And this result by itself would deal a powerful blow to the objectivist pretensions of the concept of knowledge. If there are no objectively correct facts about how one ought to reason deductively, much of what we take to be knowledge would not be binding on those who would prefer to reason differently.

But the true situation is probably worse even than this. For given the inevitable involvement of deductive reasoning in any account of how we might know the correctness of *non-deductive* epistemic principles, the problem is likely to be global: it will be difficult to see how there could be objectively correct epistemic principles of any sort.

I don’t have the space to argue for this general claim in detail here. In outline, this is how the argument would go. All the points about the inadequacy of observational or default reasonableness accounts would carry over to the non-deductive case. That means that any justification for the principles governing non-deductive

reasoning would have to be inferential. As inferential, they would either have to be non-deductive or deductive, or a mixture of the two. If non-deductive, then the justification would be rule-circular and so subject to a version of the worries just outlined. If deductive, then ditto. If a mixture, then ditto.

To put matters another way, it seems to me that all we really need, in order to raise a serious problem about the possibility of objectively correct epistemic principles, is the simple and seemingly inescapable claim that *reasoning* of some sort will be involved in any putative knowledge that we might have of any high-level epistemic claim. Once that simple thought is in place, seemingly insuperable problems are upon us virtually immediately.

How should we respond? For obvious reasons, we can't just say that there are no objectively correct principles and leave it at that. We cannot but think that some beliefs are more justified than others, and that fact entails that we cannot but think that some epistemic principles are preferable to others. But how are we to make sense of this preference, if we are not allowed to think that some principles are objectively correct and others aren't?

There look to be two options: we can either treat judgments about justification as capable only of relative truth, or we can treat them expressively, as not expressing genuinely truth-evaluable propositions in the first place. On the first view, we accommodate the result that there are no objective facts about justification by appealing only to relative facts about it; on the second view, we accommodate it by not appealing to any facts at all. I will start with a discussion of the relativist option.¹⁴

II

Relativism

Against the backdrop of the problem for objectivism just outlined, a relativism about justification can seem almost forced. There appears to be no way to justify one set of epistemic principles over another except by the use of those very epistemic principles. However, depending on what principles we begin with, distinct sets of principles will come out looking correct. In response, it seems very natural to say that there can be no such thing as *the* objectively

correct epistemic principles. There is just where we start, and how we find it natural to reason.¹⁵

There are, of course, a number of ways in which such a relativism about justification might be elaborated, but the core idea is this: whether, under the appropriate circumstances, a given body of information supports a particular belief isn't some absolute relation between the information and the belief but is rather to be understood as obtaining only relative to some further parameter – the epistemic principles accepted by a community: whereas the objectivist thinks that some proposition *P* can simply be justified (by the evidence, under the appropriate conditions, all this henceforth suppressed), the relativist thinks that we can only cogently talk about *P*'s being justified relative to a communal epistemic practice *C*, for variable *C*.

On the relativist's view, in other words, there is, in our usual of attributions of justification a hidden reference to a relation that obtains between the claim being put forward and the speaker's own community, a reference that his analysis purports to reveal, in just the way that Russell's famous analysis of definite descriptions purported to disclose a hidden reliance on existential quantification:

(J) For any speaker *S* asserting that *P* is justified: *S* is making a judgment of the form: *P* is justified relative to *S*'s communal principles *C*.¹⁶

As for the communal norms themselves, there can be no question of their being justified or correct. They are what they are.

Now, philosophical tradition has it that relativism so understood is subject to a decisive dilemma. Either the relativist is putting forward his view as objectively justified or only as relatively justified, justified for his community. If it's the former, then the view refutes itself, for there would then be, by its own admission, at least one proposition that is objectively justified (and if there is that one, is it really plausible that there shouldn't be others?). If, however, he insists that it is meant to be justified only in a relative sense, only justified for his community, then why do we as non-relativists need to worry about it?

The argument I have just presented is nearly as old as philosophy itself.¹⁷ Objectivists seem to find it decisive, whereas relativists are prone to dismiss it as worthless, a clever bit of logical trickery that has no real bearing on the issues at hand.

It's hard to see how the relativist's attitude here is to be vindicated: there is absolutely nothing illicit about self-refutations of this sort. In fairness, however, it is important to note that this famous argument does suffer from three significant weaknesses.

First, the argument is a self-refutation argument of a *pragmatic* variety, and the point is that such an argument proceeds not by uncovering a genuine contradiction in the target view, but by uncovering a contradiction between *asserting* the view and the view's content. It follows, therefore, that we cannot say, merely on the basis of the argument, that we have demonstrated the *falsity* of the claim that all justification is relative, but only that such a claim would not be assertible or believable.

Another limitation that self-refutation arguments of a pragmatic variety are subject to is that they depend on a particular vocabulary for describing the activity of knowledge – for example, on the propriety of describing the activity of knowledge in terms of the notions of *assertion* and *belief*. But perhaps these are not the right concepts for the description of cognitive activity, as some eliminativists have claimed.¹⁸ Perhaps this whole way of describing what we do, when we seek knowledge, will be replaced by some other set of terms. What would be the value of our pragmatic refutation then? Obviously, if the notion of asserting something, or of believing it, were replaced by some other way of thinking about knowledge – shmasserting and shmelieving, for example – it would be irrelevant that there is an inconsistency between *asserting* or *believing* that all justification is relative and the claim that it is. What we would need to do is find an inconsistency between shmasserting that all justification is relative and the claim that it is.

A third problem for the argument is perhaps the most serious. If the relativist opts for the horn of saying that J is meant to be justified only relative to his community, he has not yet committed himself to the view that that community is identical with the community of relativists. For all we are entitled to assume, he may mean that J is justified for a community that includes non-relativists and, hence, that it is equally justified for them. So we are not immediately entitled to say that, if he adopts that horn, we are entitled to ignore him.

For instance, the anti-objectivist argument that I presented in Part I relies only on ordinary and widely accepted epistemic norms. If the relativist motivates his view by appealing to that argument, we can hardly dismiss him by saying that his view is justified only relative to relativists. His view would appear to have been motivated for all of us.

There are certainly things that can be said in reply to these objections. In response to the first objection we may point out that it is highly significant that a view is not coherently assertible or believable. If we know a view to be not coherently believable, we know that we cannot take it seriously as a possible candidate for truth.

In response to the second objection, one can say two things. The first is that no one has come close to saying what an alternative to classical epistemology would look like, no one has provided the slightest guidance as to how we are to think of our basic cognitive activities if not in terms of the notions of asserting, claiming, saying, believing and the like. And the second is that it's very hard to see how any putative replacement would be able to evade the sorts of consideration that the pragmatic refutation employs, given how austere those considerations actually are. Surely, any replacement epistemology will have to have some notion that plays the same role as our notion of a reason for believing something; and for any such notion we will be able to run a version of the argument that we deployed above.

But it is hard to see what to say in response to the third objection, it seems to me. The epistemic norms that are relied upon in the anti-objectivist argument of Part I are ordinary norms that beg no question against the objectivist. With what right, then, does the objectivist claim the freedom simply to ignore the relativism that they seem to motivate?

At least as traditionally formulated, then, the classical pragmatic refutation of relativism seems to me to be far from decisive. Unfortunately for the relativist, however, there is a different way of formulating the objection to his view that evades these difficulties. To bring it out, let me introduce a notion – that of being ‘epistemically blameless.’ If someone is epistemically blameless in believing something then it makes no sense to criticize him for believing it. I

intend this to be an absolute notion, by contrast with the relativist's relative notion of justification.

Consider next a community *C*, and a given state of information *I* that *C* finds itself in. If justificatory relativism is true, then, even while keeping the state of information *I* fixed, it is *possible* for *C* to believe *any* proposition *P* that it wants, and be blameless. All *C* has to do is adopt whatever epistemic norm sanctions *P* under *I*. Since, according to the relativist, there can be no higher facts about which epistemic principles it would be correct to adopt, *C* can adopt any epistemic principle it wants and be blameless. Since, for any *P*, there will be some set of principles that will sanction believing it, any state of information is consistent with blameless belief in *any* proposition, if relativism is true.

In particular, *C* can blamelessly adopt epistemic norms that prohibit a relativism about justification. Indeed, because it can adopt whatever epistemic norms it wants, it can keep most of the ordinary norms in place and simply accept certain exceptions to them, whatever it takes to selectively prohibit whatever view it doesn't like, including relativism. By the relativist's own lights, there can be no objection to this maneuver.

The original hunch behind the classical pragmatic anti-relativist argument is that relativism may be blamelessly rejected. That hunch is now vindicated by our reformulated anti-relativist argument. But more than that, we see that, at least on this straightforward way of formulating a relativism about justified belief, relativism does indeed lead to an unacceptable form of 'anything goes.' On its own terms, any state of information is consistent with blameless belief in any proposition, given only appropriate (and guaranteed to be blameless) adjustments in the epistemic system.

Non-Factualism about Justification

The question is: Would we do better if we accommodated an anti-objectivism about justification not in relativist terms but in *expressivist* ones?

Allan Gibbard has developed just such an expressivist theory of judgments of rationality; adapted to the present case it would yield something like the following view: When someone says that 'x is a justified belief' they are not attributing any sort of property to

it at all, relational or otherwise; rather, they are *expressing* their acceptance of a system of norms that permits that belief under those circumstances.¹⁹

Now, it might appear at first glance that this is a considerable improvement over a relativist construal of justification. Since, in saying that a belief is justified, we are not attributing any sort of property to it, but merely expressing our acceptance of a system of norms that permits it; and since we don't as a matter of fact accept epistemic norms that permit believing anything, it looks as though the consequence that one can believe anything one likes and be blameless is blocked. Unfortunately, I shall argue that this appearance is illusory and that a non-factualism about justification is subject to much the same sort of objection as an outright relativism about it.

To see why, let's imagine that I come across someone – call him AR – who holds a view I consider utterly unjustified: for example, that there is a spaceship trailing the comet Hale-Bopp that is going to come down and swoop him away. What can be my attitude towards such a person, given a Gibbard-style expressivism? I can express my acceptance of a system of norms that forbids that belief, all right, but that seems to leave something important out. If I tell AR that his belief that *p* is irrational and unjustified, I am not merely expressing my acceptance of a system of norms that forbids it; I am claiming to see something that he is not, namely, that *p* ought not to be believed, given the available evidence. I am saying (roughly): I do not believe *p*; you should not either.

Gibbard tries to account for the normativity of such judgments by invoking a classic expressivist resource: the conversational demand. In saying that *x* is unjustified, he says, I am expressing my acceptance of a system of norms that forbids *x* and adding: Do so as well!

In and of itself, however, this does not capture the claim that I appear to be making when I claim that I am justified and AR isn't, for even someone who is simply browbeating his interlocutor can issue a conversational demand. To browbeat someone is to issue a conversational demand whilst knowing that one is not entitled to do so. So the question is: with what *right* do I insist that someone accept my view and abandon his, on non-factualist views of justi-

fication? Could not AR insist, with equal right, that I abandon my view in favor of his? Indeed, as a non-factualist, would not I have to recognize that our claims to normative authority here are perfectly symmetrical, thereby undermining any hold I might have had on the thought that I am justified and he is not? And is not this a version of the sort of relativism expressivism was supposed to avoid?

Now, AR's belief about alien spaceships may arise in a number of different ways. He may share all my epistemic norms on the fixation of belief and he may be very good at reasoning from those norms and the available evidence to the relevant conclusions. He may simply not be aware that there is not a scintilla of evidence that there is a spaceship trailing Hale-Bopp. In that case, there is no difficulty accounting for my demand that he give up his view in favor of mine. Knowing that his problem stems simply from an ignorance of the relevant facts, I can coherently ask that he take my reasoning as proxy for his own. And he, for his part, would be entirely reasonable in taking me up on my invitation.

Then, again, AR's curious belief may derive not from his ignorance of any item of evidence but from his poor abilities at reasoning: he may be bad at moving from the epistemic norms that we share and the evidence to the appropriate conclusions. Here, again, there is no difficulty accounting for the normative authority that I claim. Given that we share the relevant norms, I can again ask him to take my reasoning as proxy for his own.

But suppose that the difference between AR's beliefs and mine stems not from such mundane sources but rather from a deep-seated difference in the fundamental epistemic norms to which we subscribe, norms for the fixation of belief that are not derived from any others. In calling his view irrational, then, I am in effect demanding that he give up *his* fundamental epistemic norms in favor of the ones that I employ. And the question I am asking is: With what right do I do this, on a non-factualist view?

As an objectivist, I would have no trouble explaining my attitude here. Since, as an objectivist, I take there to be a fact of the matter which fundamental norms are correct, and since I take myself to know what they are, I can easily explain why I am insisting that my interlocutor give up his norms in favor of mine. Of course, my interlocutor, convinced of the correctness of his own norms, may

make a similar demand on me. If the norms are fundamental, this may well result in an impasse, a disagreement from which neither of us can be budged by argument. But it would at least make sense that there *is* a disagreement here and that we should be issuing (potentially ineffective) conversational demands on each other. But what explanation can the non-factualist offer of these matters?

The non-factualist may reply that there is no difficulty here. After all, he will say, the epistemic norms that I accept are unconditional: they apply to someone whether or not that person is inclined to accept them.

There seem to me to be two problems with this reply, however, one with the assumption that I accept unconditional norms in the first place, the other with my insistence that someone else also accept them.

First, if a non-factualism about justification is correct, with what right do I accept epistemic norms that are unconditional, so that they apply to someone whether or not they accept them?²⁰ If there really are no perspective-independent facts about which epistemic norms are correct, with what right do I accept norms that apply to people whether or not they accept them? Should not an appropriate sensitivity to the fact that there is nothing that makes my norms more correct than anyone else's result in my being hesitant about accepting norms that apply to others regardless of whether they are also inclined to accept them?

Second, and putting this first problem to one side, on what basis do I insist that AR give up his unconditional norms in favor of mine? I accept a particular set of fundamental norms, he accepts another. By assumption, the norms in dispute are fundamental, so there is no neutral territory on which the disagreement can be adjudicated. Furthermore, on the non-factualist view, there are no facts about which fundamental epistemic norms are correct and which ones are not. So, on what basis do I insist that he give up his norms in favor of mine?

The expressivist thinks he can evade the clutches of an unpalatable relativism by claiming that talk about a belief's being justified expresses a state of mind rather than stating anything. But this stratagem does not long conceal the view's inevitable relativistic upshot, which can now be restated in terms of the problem of

normative authority. If no evidential system is more correct than any other, then I cannot coherently think that a particular belief is blameworthy, no matter how crazy it may be, so long as that belief's is grounded in a set of fundamental epistemic norms that permit it, no matter how crazy they may be.

To repeat: the point here is not about suasive *effectiveness*. I do not mean that the realist about justification will have an easier time persuading anyone of anything. In fact, it is quite clear that there are lots of extreme positions from which no one can be dislodged by argument, whether confronted by a realist or an expressivist (this is a point to which we will have occasion to return).

The issue is rather about having the resources with which to think certain thoughts coherently. By virtue of believing that there are objective facts about what justifies what, the realist can coherently think that a particular epistemic system is mistaken. The non-factualist, however, cannot.

In a sense, the difficulty should have been evident from the start. For the root problem is with the claim with which the expressivist about justification must begin, that there is nothing that epistemically privileges one set of epistemic principles over another. Once that basic thought is in place, it becomes impossible to evade some sort of relativistic upshot. It doesn't matter whether the basic thought is embedded in an expressivist or a non-expressivist framework.

III

Vindicating Rule-Circularity: Warrant Transfer

Where do we stand? In Part I, we saw that there are powerful considerations in favor of thinking that there could not be objectively valid epistemic reasons. In Part II, on the other hand, we saw that there appears to be no palatable way to accommodate this result. Unless we are to be mired in paradox, then, we have to find some way of vindicating the claim that we *can* know what the correct epistemic principles are. And if we are to do that we have to find some way of vindicating rule-circular justifications – of defending them from the objections that they beg the question and keep bad company – for so far as I can see, that can be our only route to knowing them. That is the idea I propose to explore in this third and final part.

If rule-circular arguments are in fact capable of transferring warrant from their premises to their conclusions, we should expect this result to flow in some natural way from the conditions that govern warrant transfer quite generally. So let's begin with the general question: Under what conditions does an argument transmit the warrant for its premises to its conclusion?

One condition seems clear enough: the thinker, S, must be justified in believing the premises *p*. Beyond that, however, matters get less straightforward. It will be instructive to start with an incorrect, overly rich account of what is required in order to try to converge on something more plausible. In his article, "Epistemic Circularity,"²¹ William Alston considers, without fully endorsing, a version of the following account (I have modified it in small ways). S's belief that *p* confers warrant on his belief that *q* just in case:

- (A) S is justified in believing the premises, *p*.
- (B) *p* and *q* are logically related in such a way that if *p* is true, that is a good reason for supposing that *q* is at least likely to be true.
- (C) S knows, or is justified in believing that the logical relation between *p* and *q* is a specified in (B).
- (D) S infers *q* from *p* because of his belief specified in (C).

The conditions are intended to be singly necessary and jointly sufficient for the inference to warrant the conclusion.

Now, one problem that I wish to set aside concerns the sufficiency of these conditions. Crispin Wright and others have remarked that there are important cases where one's knowledge that *p* depends on one's prior knowledge that *q*, and in those cases it would be wrong to claim transfer of warrant from premises to conclusion.²² We may assume, however, that this problem has been accommodated by the stipulation that knowledge of the premises be suitably independent. The problem I will be interested in concerns the *necessity* of these conditions, specifically that of (C). It is easy to appreciate why.

If C were a correct necessary condition on warrant transfer, then it would follow immediately that there could be no such thing as a rule-circular justification. For C requires that, in order to use an argument employing a given rule to support the claim that that rule is truth-preserving, one already has to know that that rule is truth-preserving. And that would make the rule-circular justification otiose: the knowledge arrived at would already be presupposed.

Fortunately, however, it can readily be seen that C is intuitively too strong.

One problem with it we have already had occasion to note in connection with the passage cited from Peacocke above: it is far too sophisticated a requirement. A child who reasoned:

- If he were hiding behind that tree, he wouldn't have left his bicycle leaning on it
- But it is leaning on it
- So, he must be hiding behind some other tree

would, other conditions permitting, have reasoned his way to a justified conclusion. But such a child would not have beliefs about logical entailment. He wouldn't even have the ingredient (meta-logical) concepts.

A second, more severe, problem is suggested by Lewis Carroll's observations in his note "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles."²³ There are a number of ways of reading that famous argument, of course, and it is not clear which, if any of them, Carroll actually had in mind. But on one suggestive reading, its moral is precisely that condition (C) is too strong, if there is to be any such thing as transfer of warrant by argument.²⁴

According to the propositional picture, one can only be justified in inferring a given conclusion from a given premise according to a given rule R, if one knows that R has a particular logical property, say that it is truth-preserving.

So, for example, no one simply reasoning from the particular proposition p and the particular proposition 'if p, then q' to the proposition q could ever be justified in drawing the conclusion q; in addition, the thinker would have to know that his premises necessitate his conclusion. Let us suppose that the thinker does know this, whether this be through some act of rational insight or otherwise. How should we represent this knowledge? We could try:

$$\text{Necessarily : } p \rightarrow ((p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow q) \quad (1)$$

Some may feel it more appropriate to represent it meta-logically, thus:

$$p, p \rightarrow q \text{ logically imply } q \quad (2)$$

The question is: However the knowledge in question is represented, how does it help justify the thinker in drawing the conclusion q from the premises with which he began?

The answer might seem quite simple. Consider (1). Doesn't knowledge of (1) allow him to appreciate that the proposition that q follows logically from the premises, and so that the inference to q is truth-preserving and so justified?

In a sense, the answer is obviously 'Yes', knowledge of (1) does enable an appreciate of just that fact. But it doesn't do so automatically, but only via a transition, a transition, moreover, that is of a piece with the very sort of transition it is attempting to justify.

1. $p \rightarrow ((p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow q)$
2. p
3. $(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow q$
4. $p \rightarrow q$
5. Therefore, q

As is transparent, any such reasoning would itself involve at least one step in accord with modus ponens.

What about representing the knowledge in question as in (2)? The problem recurs. To know that p and $p \rightarrow q$ logically imply q is just to know that if p and $p \rightarrow q$ are true, then q must be true. Once more, there is an easy transition from this knowledge to the knowledge that q must be true, given that p is true and that $p \rightarrow q$ is true. But the facility of this transition should not obscure the fact that it is there and that it is of the same kind as the transition that it is attempting to shore up.

If, therefore, we insist that the original inference from p and $p \rightarrow q$ to q was unjustified unless supported by the propositional knowledge represented either by (1) or by (2), then we commit ourselves to launching an unstoppable regress. Bringing any such knowledge to bear on the justifiability of the inference would itself require justified use of the very same sort of inference whose justifiability the general knowledge was supposed to secure.

What this Lewis Carroll-inspired argument shows, it seems to me, is that at some point it must be possible to use a rule in reasoning in order to arrive at a *justified* conclusion, without this use needing to be supported by some knowledge about the rule that one is relying on. It must be possible simply to *move* between thoughts

in a way that generates justified belief, without this movement being grounded in the thinker's justified belief about the rule used in the reasoning.

Condition (C), we are agreed then, must go. But do we simply scratch it out and remain content with the external condition mentioned in (B)? And, what, exactly should that external condition be?

If we look at the external condition described by Alston, we notice something striking: it is thoroughly unhelpful. It says: If inferring q from p is to provide a good reason for believing q , then p and q must be so related that p 's being true is a good reason for believing q to be true. That verges on the platitudinous. Can we do better?

What about the suggestion that p and q be so related that the inference from p to q is reliably truth-preserving? That won't do, for it leaves out the inductive case.

What about saying that p and q be so related that the probability of q given p be reliably high? The trouble with this suggestion is that it is not clear that we have a grip on this that is other than in terms of subjective probability. And if that is right, then the suggestion collapses back into the unhelpful proposal just considered.

However, even if there were an external condition that was both helpful and general enough to cover the requisite range of cases, it's clear, it seems to me, that it would not be sufficient to explain under what conditions arguments transfer warrant. Henceforth, and for the remainder of this essay, I shall concentrate on the deductive case, leaving a treatment of induction for another occasion. (The extension of the ideas of this paper to the inductive case involve questions to which I currently have no settled answers.)

The reason why not is familiar from discussions of reliabilist conceptions of justification more generally. The mere fact that a particular inference is truth-preserving bears no intuitive link to the thinker's *entitlement* to it. There are infinitely many hopelessly complicated truth-preserving inferences that it would be absurd to suppose are justifiably performed just because they are truth-preserving.

For example, any inference of the form

If x , y , z , and n are numbers and n is greater than 2

then

$$x^n + y^n \text{ is not equal to } z^n$$

is, as we now know, reliably truth-preserving. But it would be absurd to suppose that anyone making that inference, whether or not they knew anything about Andrew Wiles' proof of Fermat's last theorem, would be drawing a justified conclusion.

Someone may object: "Of course that would not be enough. It is only in the fundamental cases, where the inference cannot be broken down into further steps, that mere truth-preservation is sufficient for warrant transfer. In non-fundamental or derived cases, actual recognition that the rule is truth-preserving may well be required."

It is difficult to see, however, how this qualification is to be motivated. Why should it matter, one way or the other, whether the inference is fundamental or not? How do we explain why it is only in cases that are fundamental that truth-preservation is sufficient for justification? The missing intuitive link between the external condition and the entitlement may be especially vivid in cases where the inferred conclusion is one that the thinker is not already entitled to; but the point would appear to hold quite generally.

We find ourselves in a familiar philosophical predicament, looking for a satisfying intermediate position between two unpalatable extremes. We cannot say that all that's required, for a deductive inference to be justified is that it be truth-preserving. But we cannot supply the missing ingredient, on pain of regress, by requiring that the thinker know that his inference is of a truth-preserving sort. So what are we to do? Can we make sense of the idea that a thinker is entitled to reason in a particular way, without this involving – incoherently – that the thinker know something about the rule involved in his reasoning?

We can, I think, if a natural, indeed virtually inevitable suggestion, is true: namely, that our logical words (in the language of thought) mean what they do by virtue of their inferential role, that 'if, then', for example (or more precisely, its mentalese equivalent) means what it does by virtue of participating in some inferences and not in others. If this is correct, and if, as is overwhelmingly plausible, it is by virtue of its role in *fundamental* (i.e., underived) inference that the conditional means what it does, then we have an

immediately compelling answer to the question: how could someone be entitled to reason according to MPP without having a positive belief that entitles him to it. If fundamental inferential dispositions fix what we mean by our words, then, as I shall now try to show, we are entitled to act on those dispositions prior to and independently of having supplied an explicit justification for them.

The satisfying intermediate position concerning warrant transfer, I therefore want to propose, is that in the case of fundamental inference the implicated rule must be meaning-constituting. Unlike the purely external requirement of truth-preservation, this view explains why the thinker is entitled to the rule; and yet unlike the impossible internalism, it does so without requiring that the thinker know that the rule is truth-preserving.

Externalism, Internalism, Inference, Justification

It is beyond the scope of this essay to defend the correctness of this account of inferential warrant in the detail that it requires. But in order to begin to get a sense of why it might be on the right track, it will be necessary to look briefly at the notion of justification more generally, and at the controversy about ‘externalist’ versus ‘internalist’ construals of it.

The issue can be usefully approached by considering an objection to the view I’m proposing that was put to me by Crispin Wright:

Boghossian’s reaction to the simple externalist account betrays an interest in reflectively appreciable warrant – warrant that makes a phenomenologically appreciable impact, as it were. But he does not connect his own proposed with such impacts; and it is not clear how the connection might be made. If it cannot be, one might as well stick with simple externalism.²⁵

Wright’s point can be restated in the form of a dilemma. Either the account is trying to reconstruct an externalist warrant, or an internalist one. If an externalist one, then the account in terms of meaning-constitution has no obvious advantage over simple truth-preservation; if an internalist one, then it is not clear that the demand is satisfied: a rule’s being meaning-constituting does not necessarily have any “appreciable phenomenological impact.”

I intend my account to capture a broadly *internalist* notion of warrant, and so I embrace the second horn of the bruited dilemma. To see why that characterization is correct, however, and why my

account *does* satisfy the constraints appropriate to an internalist notion, we have to look at how that distinction is properly conceived.

Start with a crude externalism about justified belief (and put aside worries about how reliability is to be defined): a belief is justified just in case it is produced by a reliable belief-forming mechanism. If I reject a crude externalism – and I do – it is because I was convinced by some familiar examples – Bonjour’s Samantha, Casper, Maud and Norman and Lehrer’s TrueTemp – that it is false. These examples show conclusively, I think, that mere reliability is not sufficient for justification.²⁶

If we look at these examples, we find their structure to be this: a subject’s belief that *p* is produced by a reliable mechanism but the belief is, nevertheless, in some strongly intuitive sense, epistemically irresponsible. And our response to such cases is that, under those circumstances, the subject cannot count as justified. It appears to be a condition on someone’s being epistemically justified that they *not be epistemically irresponsible* in forming their belief.

What makes a belief epistemically irresponsible? An inspection of the examples seems to suggest a uniform answer: the *absence* of a reflectively appreciable warrant for the belief (which can sometimes assume the form of the *presence* of a reflectively appreciable warrant for its negation). A steady diet of such examples has encouraged philosophers simply to *identify* possession of an internalist warrant – and hence warrant as such – with the possession of a reflectively appreciable item of information that justifies the belief, and that is in effect what Wright does in his formulation of the dilemma.

Understandable as this identification may be, it is not justified by the considerations that have been adduced by internalists. For all that the examples show, it is possible that there is some *other* way in which a belief might be responsibly held – or at least held not irresponsibly – other than by being supported by some reflectively appreciable warrant. All that the examples actually teach us is that being justified cannot coexist with being epistemically irresponsible. They don’t – and can’t – teach us that the *only* way to avoid epistemic irresponsibility requires support from a reflectively appreciable warrant.

As I have already indicated in my discussion of default reasonableness, I think that beliefs that are meaning- or concept-

constituting can be held responsibly even in the absence of a reflectively appreciable warrant for them. This is particularly compelling in the case that is the focus of the present discussion – justifiable inference. There are two key related points.

First, if it is really true that someone's being disposed to reason according to *modus ponens* is a necessary condition of their having any logical concepts at all, and so of being able to reason in any shape manner or form, there can be no intuitive sense in which their disposition to reason according to *modus ponens* can be held to be irresponsible, even in the absence of a reflectively appreciable warrant that justifies it. If you doubt that this is true, try to construct a Bonjour-style case that will make it seem intuitively irresponsible for someone to reason according to *modus ponens*, without *first* having satisfied themselves that the inference form is truth-preserving, when their doing so is a precondition of their being able to engage in any reasoning whatsoever.

Second, if my Lewis Carroll-inspired argument is correct, we know that, at least in the most basic cases, no richer warrant – nothing that would count as a phenomenologically appreciable belief about the rule, for example – could so much as be coherent. At some point, as that argument shows, it must be possible simply to *move* to a justified conclusion. But that fact should not be taken to imply that in that range of cases we have to settle for a merely externalist warrant. The core distinction between externalism and internalism in the theory of justification is properly characterized in terms of the notion of epistemic responsibility. Fundamental inferences that are meaning-constituting are not epistemically culpable, even if they are not supported by reflectively appreciable warrants. To demand more of a thinker is to demand the provably impossible.

Begging the Question (2): Reply

So far in this part of the paper, we have been looking at what we should say to the general question: Under what conditions is an argument warrant-transferring? And the answer, based purely on general considerations, has been that, in the most basic cases, the relied upon rule should be meaning-constituting.

If this answer is correct, though, it points the way forward with our question concerning the legitimacy of rule-circular justifica-

tions. For it answers the second part of the problem about begging the question: how could we be entitled to use a particular rule of inference independently of being entitled to believe that that rule is valid? So long as the rule-circular justification at issue involves a meaning-constituting rule, there can be no question of our entitlement to reason in accordance with it, even in the absence of a reflectively appreciable belief that justifies it.

What about the problem of bad company? To see how the very same resources can supply a solution to this further set of problems, we need to further explore the idea of a conceptual role semantics.

Conceptual Role Semantics

When we say that meaning is determined by conceptual role, how exactly should this be understood?

On one view, every possible conceptual role determines some meaning or other. But we know this not to be a plausible view, on purely meaning-theoretic grounds. That is the minimal lesson of Arthur Prior's 'tonk' example.²⁷

Prior imagined a connective governed by the following introduction and elimination rules:

$$A/A \text{ tonk } B \quad A \text{ tonk } B/B.$$

The specification defines a conceptual role; but what meaning does it determine? If we said that there is one, then we would have to hold that there is a thinkable proposition expressed by sentences of the form 'A tonk B'. If there were such a thinkable proposition, then there would have to be a way the world is when the proposition is true. How, though, must the world be if 'A tonk B' is to be true? Since the sentence is compound, its truth value will depend on the truth values of its ingredient sentences A and B. But we can readily see that there can be no consistent assignment of truth value to sentences of the form 'A tonk B' given the introduction and elimination rules for 'tonk'.

Given those rules, both

$$A \rightarrow A \text{ tonk } B$$

and

$$A \text{ tonk } B \rightarrow B$$

have to come out tautologous, for any A or B. It is impossible to satisfy that demand. Pick an A that's true and a B that's false. Then, for the first conditional to come out true, 'A tonk B' has to be true. However, given that B is false, 'A tonk B' has to be false if the second conditional is to come out true. So there can be no determinate way the world has to be, if 'A tonk B' is to come out true.²⁸

But we don't need actual inconsistency to make the point that not every conceptual role determines a meaning. Consider, for example, the following connective 'shmand'. Its introduction and elimination rules are exactly like those for conjunction, except that the sentence that occupies the 'A' position is restricted to a length of 25 letters.

$$\begin{array}{l} A (<25), B/A \text{ shmand } B \quad A (<25) \text{ shmand } B/A (<25) \\ A (<25) \text{ shmand } B/B \end{array}$$

What proposition would be expressed by sentences of the form 'A shmand B'? How would the world have to be if this sort of proposition is to be true? Clearly, there is no determinate answer to that question.²⁹

For purely meaning-theoretic reasons, then, we should deny that every conceptual role determines a meaning. We should insist that a conceptual role determines a meaning for an expression only if it manages to contribute in some determinate way to determining how the world would have to be if sentences involving the expression are to be true. Put in other words, the way to understand a conceptual role theory of the logical constants is to see them as subject in part to the implicit stipulation:

Let x express that meaning, if any, whose semantic value makes a particular class of inferences truth-preserving. If there is no such value, then there is no such meaning.³⁰

Bad Company: Reply

Now, if that is the correct way to think of a conceptual role semantics, then the problem of bad company takes care of itself. If, in a given fundamental rule-circular justification, there is a meaningful inference to begin with, then it is guaranteed to be

truth-preserving, for a rule of inference doesn't get to determine a meaning unless it is truth-preserving. As a result, the problem of bad company does not arise: it is impossible, intelligibly, to justify a non-truth-preserving rule, such as the tonk rules or R^* .

The key insight is that, just as there are objective constraints on what is true, so there are objective constraints on what we can mean. This is something that we have reason to accept entirely independently of our epistemological investments. A conceptual role semantics, by virtue of its ties to the notion of justification, transforms this constraint on meaning into a constraint on justification that simultaneously vindicates the possibility of rule-circular justifications while staving off the threat of an unpalatable relativism.³¹

Begging the Skeptic's Question

It is time now to turn to the final problem I outlined for a rule-circular justification, its incapacity to move the appropriate skeptic. The point at issue is prefigured in Dummett's discussion when he says that rule-circularity will be damaging only to a justificatory argument that

is addressed to someone who genuinely doubts whether the law is valid, and is intended to persuade him that it is . . . If, on the other hand, it is intended to satisfy the philosopher's perplexity about our entitlement to reason in accordance with such a law, it may well do. The philosopher does not seriously doubt the validity of the law and is therefore prepared to accept an argument in accordance with it. He does not seek to be persuaded of the conclusion; what he is seeking is an *explanation* of its being true.³²

Before inquiring into the significance of this, let us make sure that we do not underestimate all that a rule-circular justification is capable of accomplishing. First, it is not at all similar to a grossly circular argument in that it is not trivially guaranteed to succeed. For one thing, the relevant premises from which, by (as it might be) a single application of the rule the desired conclusion is to follow, may not be available. For another, not all rules are self-supporting. Second, the rule-circular argument for MPP asks in effect that it be granted that *one* application of MPP and from that it promises to deliver the conclusion that MPP is *necessarily* truth-preserving, truth-preserving in *any possible* application. That seems

like a significance advance. Finally, this one application will itself be one to which we are entitled if, as seems plausible, MPP is meaning-constituting.

For all that, it is nevertheless true that if we were confronted by a skeptic who *doubted* the validity of MPP in *any* of its applications, we could not use this argument to rationally persuade him. Doubting the rule, he would rightly reject this particular argument in its favor. Since, by assumption, we have no other sort of argument to offer him, it seems that we are powerless to persuade him of the rightness of our position. The question is: What is the epistemic significance of this fact?

But could not we say to him: “Look, MPP is meaning-constituting. If you reject it then you simply mean something different by ‘if, then’ and therefore there is no real disagreement after all.” But if our skeptic were playing his cards right, he would deny that MPP is meaning-constituting. To persuade him otherwise we would have to offer him an argument and that argument would in turn have to use MPP. And then we would be right back where we started, faced with the question: What is the epistemological significance of the fact that we are unable to persuade the skeptic about MPP?

In the passage cited above, Dummett seems to think that its significance lies in the way in which it highlights a distinction between two distinct projects: quelling the skeptic’s doubts versus *explaining* to a non-skeptic why MPP is valid.

But I do not really understand what it would be to explain *why* a given logical law is true. What could it mean except something along the lines of a conventionalism about logical truth, an account which really does aspire to explain *where* logical truth comes from? As any reader of Quine’s “Truth By Convention,” will be aware however, there are decisive objections to conventionalism, objections that probably generalize to any explanatory project of that form.³³

The question that we need to be asking, I think, is rather this: Can we say that something is a real *reason* for believing that p if it cannot be used to answer a skeptic about p? Is it criterial for my having a genuine reason for believing that p that I be able to use it to persuade someone who doubts whether p?

Well, in fact, we *are* very drawn to the idea that if I am genuinely justified in believing that *p*, then, in principle, I ought to be able to bring you around as well – or, at the very least, I ought to be able to take you some distance towards rational belief in *p*. Of course, you may not understand the warrant that I have; or, being more cautious than I, you may not assign it the same weight that I do. But, prescinding from these and similar considerations, how could I be genuinely justified in believing something and yet be totally unable to have any sway with you? As Thomas Nagel puts it in his recent book *The Last Word*:

To reason is to think systematically in ways that anyone looking over my shoulder ought to be able to recognize as correct. It is this generality that relativists and subjectivists deny.³⁴

Notice how naturally it comes to Nagel to equate the claim that *there are* objectively valid reasons, reasons that would apply to anyone anywhere, with the *epistemic* claim that anyone exposed to them ought to be able to *recognize* them as reasons.

There is a principle behind this thought, one that we may call the “principle of the universal accessibility of reasons”: If something is a genuine reason for believing that *p*, then, subject to the provisos just made, its rationalizing force ought to be accessible from any epistemic standpoint.

I think that this principle has played a very large role in our thinking about justification. It is what explains, it seems to me, why the theory of knowledge is so often centered on a refutation of *skepticism*. We take it to be criterial of our having a genuine warrant for a given proposition that we be in a position to refute a skeptic about *p*.

If my discussion has been on the right track, however, then one of its main lessons is that this principle is false. For consider: We cannot accept the claim that we have no warrant whatsoever for the core logical principles. We cannot conceive what such a warrant could consist in (whether this be a priori or a posteriori) if not in some sort of inference using those very core logical principles. So, there must be genuine warrants that will not carry any sway with a skeptic. Answering the skeptic about modus ponens cannot be criterial for whether we are warranted in believing modus ponens.

To put this point another way: we must recognize a distinction between two different sorts of reason – *suasive* and *non-suasive reasons*. And we have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that in certain areas of knowledge, logic featuring prominently among them, our warrant can be at most non-suasive, powerless to quell skeptical doubts.

It seems to me that this is a conclusion that we have reason to accept entirely independently of our present concern with knowledge of logic, that there are many other compartments of knowledge in which our warrant can be at most non-suasive. One such area concerns our knowledge of the existence of other minds; another concerns our knowledge of the external world. I think that in both of these areas it is very unlikely that we will be able to provide warrants for our belief that would be usable against a determined and level-headed skeptic.³⁵

The correct project in epistemology is to show how knowledge is possible. It is not the refutation of arbitrarily extreme skeptics.

CONCLUSION

A central problem for the possibility of objectively valid epistemic principles has to do with explaining how we might know what they are: how could there be any if our only means of access to them is via rule-circular reasoning? I hope to have shown that, if the notion of justification and its transfer across argument is understood correctly, rule-circular justifications can be vindicated.

The case is constructed on the basis of several independently plausible elements. First, that a plausible construal of warrant transfer has it that, in the most basic cases, warrant is transferred only across inferences that are meaning-constituting. Second, that if an inferential disposition is meaning-constituting then it is a fortiori reasonable, reasonably used independently of any belief about its properties. Third, that something can be a warrant for something even if it is powerless to bring about a determined skeptic.

Putting all this together allows us to say that we are justified in our fundamental epistemic beliefs in spite of the fact that we can produce only rule-circular arguments for them. The price is that we have to admit that we cannot use this form of argument to silence

skeptical doubts. It is arguable, however, that with respect to matters that are as basic as logic and principles of justification, that was never in prospect anyway.

NOTES

¹ For helpful comments, I would like to thank Christopher Peacocke, Stephen Schiffer, Josh Schechter and the audience at the Pacific APA meetings in Albuquerque, NM in April 2000. I am especially grateful to Crispin Wright for agreeing to comment on that occasion and for numerous stimulating conversations on this and related topics. Some sections of this paper overlap with parts of my “Knowledge of Logic,” which appears in P. Boghossian and C. Peacocke (eds.): *New Essays on the A Priori* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

² For discussion, though, see my “The Rule-Following Considerations,’ *Mind*, 1989.

³ As James van Cleve points out, any epistemic principle has the following form:

(EP) If a belief of type B is based on a reason of type R then the belief is justified.

On a foundationalist view (and adopting van Cleve’s terminology), such principles will include both *generation* principles and *transmission* principles. Generation principles specify circumstances under which a belief is justified independently of its logical relations to other beliefs; transmission principles specify under what circumstances the warrant for a given belief transmits to other beliefs. On a coherentist view, epistemic principles will largely consist of some sort of hybrid of these two, assuming the form: If P coheres with the system of propositions accepted by S, then P is justified for S. This is analogous to a generation principle in that its antecedent does not mention any term of epistemic appraisal, but analogous to a transmission principle in that its antecedent specifies relations to other proposition. See van Cleve: “Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle,” *The Philosophical Review*, pp. 55–91. For the sake of concreteness, in this essay I will assume that epistemic principles always take the form characteristic of foundationalism; but the arguments will apply to either type of epistemic system.

⁴ For discussion, see my “Knowledge of Logic” in Boghossian and Peacocke, *op. cit.*

⁵ Some philosophers distinguish between the *activity* of giving a justification and the *property* of being justified. My question involves the latter, more basic, notion: Is it possible for our logical beliefs to have the property of being justified?

⁶ “Comments on Salmon’s ‘Inductive Evidence,’ *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965), pp. 274–276. It is cited in van Cleve, “Reliability, Justification and Induction,” *Minnesota Studies in Philosophy of Science*, 1984.

⁷ Laurence Bonjour, in his *In Defense of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) attempts to defend a “rational right” view of the a priori.

For critical discussion, see my “Inference and Insight” forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

⁸ See Hartry Field’s “Apriority as an Evaluative Notion,” in Boghossian and Peacocke, *op. cit.*

⁹ See Tyler Burge: “Individualism and Self-Knowledge,” in *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988), 649–663.

¹⁰ “Explaining the A priori,” in Boghossian and Peacocke (eds.), *ibid.*

¹¹ I owe the term “bad company” to Crispin Wright.

¹² The example is Crispin Wright’s, drawn from his commentary on a related paper at the Stirling Conference on Naturalism, April 1997.

¹³ Due to Marcus Giaquinto.

¹⁴ Why not consider instead a relativism or non-factualism about logic itself, rather than about justification? The reason is that these views are well-known to be hopeless. A relativism about logic is just a version of a conventionalism about it, a view decisively defeated in Quine’s “Truth by Conventiohn,” reprinted in *The Ways of Paradox* (). And as I have argued in “Knowledge of Logic,” those objections carry over straightforwardly to a non-factualist construal of logic.

¹⁵ Some may find this thought expressed in Wittgenstein’s remark: “If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.” *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), para. 217.

¹⁶ The relativist could also be understood as arguing not that we already speak this way, but that we ought to, if we are to speak cogently.

¹⁷ It can be found in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, and in homas Nagel’s *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁸ See, for example, Paul Churchland: *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 1983).

¹⁹ Allan Gibbard: *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

²⁰ David Velleman has emphasized this point to me.

²¹ *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47 (1986).

²² C. Wright, “On the Acquisition of Warrant by Transfer,” manuscript.

²³ MIND, 1895.

²⁴ James van Cleve also suggests that as the moral of the Lewis Carroll argument; but the argument he outlines is distinct from the one I shall present. See his “Reliability, Justification and Induction,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 1984.

²⁵ The objection is from a draft of a commentary on an earlier version of this paper delivered at the Pacific Division meetings of the APA, Albuquerque, NM, in April of 2000.

²⁶ L. Bonjour: *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1985), K. Lehrer: *The Theory of Knowledge* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1990).

²⁷ A. Prior: “The Runabout Inference Ticket,” in *Analysis* 21 (1960–1961), pp. 38–39.

²⁸ Cf. Christopher Peacocke, "Sense and Justification," *MIND*, October 1992, p. 802.

²⁹ Christopher Peacocke gives a similar example in "Proof and Truth," in J. Haldane and C. Wright: *Reality, Representation and Projection* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), pp. 165–190. Peacocke has long urged that a conceptual role semantics be understood in this restrictive truth-theoretic way. Although my route into these issues is distinct from his, I find myself in agreement with much of Peacocke has to say about the logical constants and the role of meaning in justification.

³⁰ See my "Analyticity," in Hale and Wright (eds.): *A Comparison to the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

³¹ I suspect that it is Wittgenstein's failure to appreciate the point that not every conceptual role determines a meaning that led to the relativistic-sounding passages of the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*.

³² M. Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 19).

³³ See W. V. O. Quine, "Truth by Convention," reprinted in *The Ways of Paradox* (NY: Random House, 1996). For further discussion, see my "Knowledge of Logic," in Boghossian and Peacocke, op. cit.

³⁴ Nagel, op. cit. p. 5.

³⁵ In related though distinct contexts, similar points are made both in Alston "Epistemic Circularity," op. cit., and in James van Cleve "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles and the Cartesian Circle," *Philosophical Review*, January 1979.

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