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Evidentialism and the  
Diachronic Nature of Epistemic Evaluation

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### Section I: Introduction

Back in the good old days of the 1980s and 90s, epistemology was focused on the nature of epistemic justification. Does justified belief have a foundationalist or coherentist structure? Is justification a largely responsiblist notion or is it instead a nondeontic evaluation? Are only internal factors relevant to justified belief or is the reliability of the belief-forming process crucial to a belief's epistemic status?

During this time, the namesake of my fellowship, Alvin Plantinga, was arguing that justification wasn't really that important in the theory of knowledge, and that epistemic "warrant" (his preferred term for that which—mostly—makes true belief knowledge) is a matter of teleology (I always thought that "teleological reliabilism" was a better name for his position that was his favored "proper functionalism"). Knowledge is true belief that is formed by reliable, truth-aimed cognitive processes functioning according to design in an appropriate environment.

Plantinga's entrance into epistemology was via the philosophy of religion. In his remarkable *Nous* paper of 1981 ("Is Belief in God Properly Basic?"), Plantinga boldly asserted – and then defended – the claim that belief in God can be rational

even if there are no good arguments for it; moreover, religious belief could be epistemically beyond reproach even if there is no evidence for it at all. Bold claims, those. (His argumentative style reminded me of the children's game, "King of the Mountain." Whoever is the King is entitled to that position simply in virtue of successfully knocking back anyone who would try to push him off. Al stood on his epistemic hill and challenged the philosophical world to knock him off with an objection that he couldn't answer. Some of us think he stands on that hill still.) What Plantinga gave us in the small article was a promissory note for the work that would come in this epistemology trilogy.

This talk will not be a discussion of Reformed Epistemology. Instead, it will focus on an enemy of both Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology and his more general theory of knowledge, viz., evidentialism. I want to have a brief look at what Plantinga had in mind when he talked about evidentialism and where he thought evidentialism came from. From there, I'll discuss what evidentialism has come to be in the epistemological literature. Finally, in the spirit of my fellowship's namesake, I will argue that evidentialism, while not exactly false, should not be taken with particular seriousness.

## Section II: Plantinga on evidentialism

In "Reason and Belief in God,"<sup>1</sup> Plantinga took on what he called the "evidentialist objection" to theism. According to the evidentialist, belief in God can be rational only if it is based on sufficient evidence. While Plantinga could find many

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<sup>1</sup> Plantinga 1981

quotations from eminent philosophers insisting both that belief in God required sufficient evidence and that such evidence is lacking, there was no detailed discussion of what precisely such objectors had in mind. Evidence was required for what exactly? Justified belief? Rational belief? Blameless belief? And what would count as sufficient evidence? Still, three points were clear. First, the kind of evidence that interested them is what we might call “public evidence.” Evidence that is grounded primarily in one’s religious experience would not count as sufficient evidence in the relevant sense. It’s not that the epistemic significance of religious experience is ruled out of court on the evidentialist’s perspective. One can use the phenomenon of religious experience as one finds it in many societies across a vast span of human existence and attempt to construct an inference to the best explanation, say, that supports belief in God. This leads to the second point: a valid argument for the existence of God with premises that no rational person could dispute would be sufficient for rational religious belief. Presumably, in principle there might be arguments that don’t quite live up to this high standard but that would comprise sufficient evidence. But, and this is the third point, the evidentialist was quite sure that there are no arguments of either type. Since the only kind of sufficient evidence would be argumentative and there are no good arguments for God’s existence, belief in God is thereby judged to be irrational on the evidentialist’s perspective.

The line of reasoning above might well motivate the theist to ask why one should accept evidentialism? While, of course, Plantinga was concerned to deny evidentialism, he did this by attempting to identify its intellectual grounding, which,

he argued could be found in certain forms of foundationalism. According to these views, only certain kinds of beliefs can be properly basic—that is, rational without obtaining positive epistemic support from other things the subject believes (or her “evidence” in Plantinga’s somewhat restricted use of that term). Beliefs that are self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses can be properly basic, on this classical foundationalist perspective, but nothing else can. And since the belief that God exists is none of these three types so it can’t be properly basic.

I won’t be concerned here with Plantinga’s argument against classical foundationalism. Instead, I want to consider a broader evidentialist thesis that has obvious similarities to Plantinga’s evidentialism but that is grounded in something rather different. It will be this subsequent variety of evidentialism that I shall be concerned to evaluate in this essay.

### Section III: Feldman/Conee Evidentialism

Richard Feldman and Earl Conee have spent much of the past thirty years developing and defending their version of evidentialism. While their view is clearly in the spirit of the position that Plantinga argued against, it is a more general theory of what is fundamental to epistemic justification.

According to Feldman and Conee (hereafter “F&C”), a belief is justified for one iff it fits one’s evidence. More specifically,

D: Doxastic attitude D toward proposition p is epistemically justified for S at t if and only if having D toward p fits the evidence S has at t.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Feldman and Conee 1985, p. 83.

Somewhat more recently, F&C have written that their “bedrock view” is the following supervenience thesis:

S: The epistemic justification of anyone’s doxastic attitude toward any proposition at any time strongly supervenes on the evidence that the person has at the time.<sup>3</sup>

One decidedly attractive aspect of evidentialism is its universal applicability. It provides a recipe for determining the epistemic status of everything for everyone. Take any proposition at all and any person at all, given that person’s evidence, there is precisely one doxastic attitude (or if you prefer, credence level) that it is epistemically permissible for that person to take regarding that proposition.

F&C’s evidentialism differs from the evidentialism that Plantinga considers in several respects. First, as we’ve seen, it is an absolutely universal theory of justification whereas Plantinga’s evidentialism is a thesis about the rational requirements of belief in God’s existence. Second, and equally importantly, F&C are clear that they have a wider view of evidence than Plantinga has (or had at the time of his early epistemology writings). In particular, F&C are happy to have perceptual, memory, and introspective states in the evidential corpus whereas on Plantinga’s way of construing evidence, they don’t count.

Despite these differences, the underpinnings of Plantinganian evidentialism and evidentialism proper are the same: a belief’s justification is strictly a function of one’s mental states. More specifically, a belief (or belief in God in particular) is justified for S at t only if S’s mental states evidentially support it at t.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

We've seen that F&C claim that their bedrock commitment is to a supervenience thesis: the epistemic supervenes on evidence. In the recent epistemological literature, a similar, and perhaps even more bedrock, thesis has been discussed and is also accepted by F&C. "Mentalism," as it has come to be called, is also a supervenience thesis. Rather than the claim that the epistemic supervenes on "evidence," mentalism is the thesis that justification supervenes on mental states.

M1: "If any two possible individuals are exactly alike mentally, then they are alike justificationaly, e.g., the same beliefs are justified for them to the same extent."<sup>4</sup>

Clearly mentalism is more fundamental than evidentialism is, at least provided that one makes standard assumptions about evidence and mental states. On the way of thinking about evidence that F&C clearly adopt, nothing is evidence for a person that is not among her mental contents. So since nothing can be relevant to justification that isn't evidence and since nothing can be evidence that's not a mental state, then nothing can be relevant to justification that's not a mental state. But not all mental states are evidence (or at least plausibly so), so while evidentialism is grounded in mentalism, it doesn't reduce to it.

It can't be denied that there is something initially plausible about evidentialism. Here's one way to see this: we often speak as though a reasonable (or rational or justified) belief is a belief for which one has reasons. But "having reasons" in this context can be construed as "having evidence." While it might be

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<sup>4</sup> Conee and Feldman 1999, p. 56

that a variety of evidentialism that recognizes only beliefs as evidence (that is, “evidence” as defined by Plantinga) has insufficient resources to provide a general account of justification, a more ecumenical evidentialism of the sort that F&C champion does not have that liability. Experiential states produced by the senses, for example, are evidentially robust. My seeing you pour me a golden, frothy beverage from a bottle reading “Bell’s Two-Hearted IPA,” my hearing the sound of the drink being poured, and my smelling the beverage’s hoppy goodness all together provide me with very good evidence that there is ale in the glass before me. Were I to have that belief in the absence of such reasons--of such evidence-- it would be not be justified (or so one might plausibly claim).

On the other hand, an evidentialist account of justification has its problems too. Among the difficulties that it faces is what is called in the literature “the problem of forgotten evidence” regarding the justification of memory belief. Here’s the issue: suppose that in your junior high history course, you do a report on the Civil War. You learn quite a bit about the Battle of Fort Sumter and come to justifiably believe (and even know) that this was the first military conflict of the war. But the years pass and at the age of 30 you no longer remember writing the report. And you have not kept up an interest in the War of Northern Aggression (as we call it down in Arkansas). Still, you’ve never forgotten that the Battle of Fort Sumter was the first skirmish in the Civil War. In such a case, it seems that you are nevertheless justified in continuing to believe as you do even though your original evidence is no longer available to you, and might even be no longer part of your doxastic corpus at all.

In the rest of this paper, I will argue that evidentialism of the F&C variety is not so much false as it is irrelevant to our most pressing epistemic concerns. I'll begin by looking at an objection that was first offered by Hillary Kornblith in the early 1980s, and proceed to discuss what I take to be essentially the same objection recently presented by Keith DeRose. While I think that Kornblith and DeRose are right as far as they go, there is a deeper insight into the nature of epistemic normativity that neither fully appreciates. And if one appreciates it, then one can understand why it is right to say that evidentialism is not so much wrong as it is unimportant.

#### Section IV: The Kornblith/DeRose Objection

In his paper "Justified Belief and Epistemically Responsible Action," Hillary Kornblith argues for an account of epistemic justification that has responsibility at its core. While he isn't explicitly concerned with refuting evidentialism by name, that is likely because the term wasn't much in the literature (F&C would publish their landmark article "Evidentialism" two years after Kornblith's paper came out). Kornblith dubs the position that he has in his sites "the theory of ideal reasoning." On such a theory, a belief is justified iff proper (or ideal) reasoning has led to the belief in question. An example of this theory applied is that if a subject has good evidence for the truth of a proposition, sees the evidential relations between the evidence set and the proposition, and comes to believe the proposition on the basis of the evidence, then the belief is the result of proper reasoning and so is justified.



Kornblith argues that ideal (or even proper) reasoning is neither necessary nor sufficient for justification. It's not necessary because there are heuristics that we are naturally disposed employ that are not proper modes of reasoning (e.g., drawing conclusions based on small samples) but which we might not be in a position to know are unreliable. What concerns us, though, is the sufficiency objection. Here's Kornblith's counterexample.

Consider the case of Jones. Jones is a headstrong young physicist, eager to hear the praise of his colleagues. After Jones reads a paper, a senior colleague presents an objection. Expecting praise and unable to tolerate criticism, Jones pays no attention to the objection; while the criticism is devastating, it fails to make any impact on Jones' beliefs because Jones has not even heard it. Jones' conduct is epistemically irresponsible; had Jones' actions been guided by a desire to have true beliefs, he would have listened carefully to the objection. Since his continuing to believe the doctrines presented in his paper is due, in part, to this epistemically irresponsible act, his continued belief is unjustified.<sup>5</sup>

So Jones might have come to the belief that his thesis is true by use of ideal reasoning but the fact that he purposely refuses to hear objections to his position means that his belief is irresponsibly held and hence unjustified. Notice that since Jones doesn't even listen to the objection of his colleague, his evidence after the objection has been stated is (arguably) just what it was before. So the justificatory

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<sup>5</sup> Kornblith 1983, p. 36.

status of the belief changes even while the reasons Jones has for his belief stay the same.

Keith DeRose offers a similar case and his is aimed squarely at F&C evidentialism. The example DeRose offers that interests me is given as an elaboration of a first case that is as follows.

Suppose that Henry firmly believes that *p*—it doesn't matter much what *p* is—and has excellent evidence for *p* (evidence that's strong enough to adequately support the firm and confident attitude Henry has adopted toward *p*). Suppose further that Henry doesn't have evidence against *p* so the attitude toward *p* that fits all the evidence Henry possesses is the confident belief that Henry in fact holds. But suppose Henry doesn't believe that *p* on the basis of the excellent evidence for it that he possesses. Indeed, Henry hasn't even considered *p* in the light of this excellent evidence, and the fact that he possesses good evidence for *p* is no part of the explanation for why Henry believes as he does. Rather, Henry believes that *p* on the basis of some other beliefs of his that he considers to be good evidence for *p*, but which in fact constitute absolutely lousy evidence for *p*.<sup>6</sup>

The point here is that having on balance terrific evidence for *p* isn't sufficient for justified belief (or technically, for "believing as one ought"). DeRose recognizes that there may yet be some broad sense in which Henry would be

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<sup>6</sup> DeRose 2011, p. 138

justified in believing that p (or he would be believing as he ought) and so he adds to the case this wrinkle.

Suppose...there is some evidence Henry very easily could have and should have, gathered, but that he negligently never encountered. This would have been very strong evidence against p. So strong that, despite the excellent evidence Henry possesses in favor of p, this negative evidence that Henry should have gathered would have completely outweighed the positive evidence he actually possesses, such that disbelief of p would have been the attitude that would have best suited Henry's evidence, had he gathered this negative evidence.<sup>7</sup>

Both Kornblith's and DeRose's cases, then, are instances in which a subject has a total evidence set that would justify a belief had the subject been responsible in her cognitive dealings. It's an interesting question whether the counterfactual that Kornblith and DeRose make part of their cases is necessary for them (i.e., if the subject were to have been responsible, he would have gained new evidence that would have defeated the evidence he previously had for his belief). Might Jones' justification be equally well defeated even if the objection would not have been "devastating"? Might Henry be justified even if his taking on the evidence he should have added wouldn't have significantly reduced the probative force of his total evidence? Be that as it may, we have here what I'll dub the "Objection from Irresponsibility." The objection is that evidentialism is mistaken as a theory of

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<sup>7</sup> DeRose 2011, p. 139

justification because having a set of objectively strong evidence E for P is not sufficient for being justified in believing that P on the basis of E.

As an aside, I think the best way to understand this objection is that while it allows that a belief that P's being grounded in good evidence E (where E is the total of one's evidence) is sufficient for prima facie justification, having behaved irresponsibly with respect to that belief is enough to defeat that justification in the end.

By my lights, the Objection from Irresponsibility expresses a symptom of what ails evidentialism but it doesn't diagnose the root problem. But before I get to that, I want to say a bit about why I am both in deep sympathy with the problems that Kornblith and DeRose uncover for evidentialism and yet think that neither shows that evidentialism (properly construed) is wrong.

#### Section V: Varieties of Epistemic Evaluation

I must begin with an admission: the way I'm construing evidentialism from here on out, the way that I think is proper, is not how Kornblith or even Feldman and Conee construe it. (DeRose's discussion is more complicated on this score.) The point at issue between Kornblith, Feldman and Conee, and me concerns the analysandum of the theory. Feldman and Conee are explicit that they take their theory to be an account of epistemic justification. Kornblith's counterexample to the theory of ideal reasoning is a counterexample to a theory of justification, and Kornblith develops his own responsibilist view of justification in the second part of his paper.

In opposition to both Kornblith and to Feldman and Conee, I reject the idea that there is a single concept that epistemologists are exploring when they talk about “justification.” We often assume that there is an “ordinary understanding” of epistemic justification and that one of our jobs is to provide an account of its nature. But I think that the last forty years of epistemology in the analytic tradition has taught us that there is no such thing as a well-behaved, coherent ordinary concept of epistemic justification.

Yet I’m not a justification nihilist and for two independent reasons. First, rather than arguing for justificatory abstinence, I’m all for justificatory promiscuity. As William Alston argued, there are a great many epistemic goods, many of which have been mistakenly identified as the essence of justification, and the projects of distinguishing among them and fleshing out normative principles appropriate to each is very much worth doing.<sup>8</sup> All that gets lost is the fight over which of these goods (or which combination of them) is that in which *the* concept of justification consists.

The other reason I’m not a justification nihilist is that I think there is a way of *creating* a well-behaved concept that is epistemically important. The way to do this is to go back to where the term ‘justification’ was introduced in epistemology, and that takes us to Edmund Gettier’s famous paper “Is Knowledge Justified True Belief?”<sup>9</sup> Although Gettier claims that he is explicating the “traditional” concept of knowledge, the two examples he offers (the views of Ayer and Chisholm) don’t use that term. So in Gettier’s pen, “justification” becomes a placeholder for whatever it

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<sup>8</sup> Alston 2005

<sup>9</sup> Gettier 1963

is that makes true belief knowledge apart from Gettier considerations. We can get a philosophically useful concept, then, if we understand justification as a quasi-theoretical term, defined by its role in the theory of knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

But back to evidentialism. For the moment, and only for the moment, I'd like to say something nice about it. It seems clear that there is an epistemic good at which the evidentialist is pointing, and that this epistemic good might well be independent of questions of epistemic responsibility. In my "let a thousand flowers bloom" promiscuity, I'm happy to say both that Kornblith and DeRose are on to something (and which I'll argue below is related to something important) while at the same time grant that evidentialism is an appealing position about some epistemic good or other. So while in many ways, my ultimate sympathies are with the Kornblith/DeRose side of this dispute, it's not because I think that their examples show that evidentialism is a false theory of justification—because everything is a false theory of justification since there is no coherent concept there to be explicated. Rather it is because I think they are onto a kind of epistemic evaluation that is more significant than anything the evidentialist could hope to capture. In what remains of this paper, I'll make the best case I can for this claim.

#### Section VI: The Diachronic Nature of Normative Evaluation

As we've seen, the Objection from Irresponsibility claims that having a solid evidential base for a proposition is insufficient for the justification of a belief with that content. Kornblith and DeRose argue that if there is antecedent epistemic

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Senor 2013

irresponsibility such that had the person been responsible, her evidential base would not have supported the proposition, then the person won't be justified even if the evidence she has does provide good support for the proposition. The criticism of evidentialism that I will offer shares one key feature with the Objection from Irresponsibility: both depend on diachronic considerations. Whereas Kornblith and DeRose charge that prior *epistemic irresponsibility* undercuts justification, I will argue more generally that important types of epistemic evaluation take into consideration diachronic features of the belief, subject, evidence, or perhaps even epistemic environment.

I noted earlier that evidentialism, as Feldman and Conee develop it, is underwritten by mentalism. Mentalism, if you will recall, is a supervenience thesis to the effect that the epistemic supervenes on the mental. Feldman and Conee provide one other formulation of this thesis that we have not yet seen. It is this:

M2: "The justificatory status of a person's doxastic attitudes strongly supervenes on the person's occurrent and dispositional mental states, events, and conditions."<sup>11</sup>

I offer this fourth thesis not so much for exegetical completeness but because it reinforces a point I want to focus in on. According to F&C evidentialism, what matters for the justificatory status of a belief are only the subject's mental states (ahistorically construed) at the time of evaluation. One's past mental states that are no longer part of one's cognitive repertoire are justificatorily irrelevant. So, to go back to an earlier case, if you no longer have occurrently or dispositionally the

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<sup>11</sup> Conee and Feldman 1999, p. 56.

beliefs and experiences that initially grounded your belief that the Battle of Fort Sumter was the first battle of the Civil War, then those beliefs and experiences, and the fact that you had them, cannot play any role in the justification of your current belief. Although we will come back to it later, the Problem of Forgotten Evidence, as such, is not my concern here.

Evidentialism entails that epistemic evaluation (or at least justificatory evaluation) is a fully synchronic affair. And if that is true, then epistemic evaluation is significantly different from other types of substantive normative evaluation. But there is no reason to think that it is different in that way. So evidentialism is either false or, my preferred conclusion, not a substantive form of normative evaluation.

My argument is grounded in a comparison of epistemic evaluation with normative evaluation in other domains, and in the kinds of evaluations that we take to be important there. In particular, I will look at prudential normativity, what I'll call "skill" normativity, and moral normativity, and argue that evaluations we make that assume the analog of epistemological mentalism are mostly of minor importance. Instead, what we have reason to care about in these domains is diachronic evaluation.

**VI.1 Prudential Normativity:** Sally has a good job for which she is better compensated than she ever thought he'd be. Unfortunately, her skills are not transferrable and should she lose this position, her financial situation would be bleak. Still, her job isn't particularly demanding and in addition to being high-paying, it leaves her time for family and hobbies. In short, Sally knows that succeeding in her current position is in her best interest. But Sally is weak-willed



and often puts off the work she should be doing. It is now the night before a significant project is due. She should have dedicated more than a week doing research for the report, and had she done so, she would have produced a very good piece of work. As things stand, however, Sally has hardly spent any time on it at all. And this is a real problem for Sally because her boss will not tolerate tardiness. Sally has been told in no uncertain terms that failing to turn in her project on the day that it is due will result in her being fired. On the other hand, turning in a very bad report on time might also cost her her job but it might not. Taking stock of her situation on this, the night before her project is due, Sally dashes off the best report she can write given her limited time and turns in her substandard work the next morning. The question: is Sally prudentially justified in turning in a very poor report? The proponent of mentalism regarding practical rationality will think that she is so justified. After all, consider Swamp Sally. Turning in the bad report is clearly what is rational for her to do. Similarly, just prior to turning in the report, Sally's options were to fail to turn in a report at all and hence lose her job or turn in a very poor report and have a chance of keeping it. It is clear that given her ahistorically-construed psychological states just prior to making the decision to hand in her dashed-off report, what she should do then is turn in the report (and this is clearly what Swamp Sally would be justified in doing in those circumstances).

**VI.2 Regarding Skill Normativity:** Ty is a baseball player with exceptional talent. While he has tremendous speed, he is yet rather undeveloped and often makes bad mistakes on the base paths. In today's game, he draws a lead-off walk and is on first base with second base empty. Wanting badly to steal second to make

a good impression, Ty takes a very large lead off first, and leans toward second base. The pitcher begins his wind up and then quickly wheels and throws to first. Ty is now dead to rights. If he retreats to first, he'll surely be out. In his sorry position, there is nothing for Ty to do but to run to second and hope for a bad throw or a drop from the fielder covering the base. Baseball mentalism would have us evaluate Ty's running to second in light of only the factors in play at the moment Ty attempts his steal. Consider Swamp Ty: in his first conscious moment of existence, Swamp Ty sees that his only hope of not making an out is to take off for second; he would be foolish to either stay put or dive back to first. Therefore, his running to second is entirely appropriate; there is nothing else for him to do consistent with the goal of success as a base runner. So given his situation (and what he believes about it) Ty is right to head toward second; diving back to first would be a sure out. From a Baseball mentalism perspective, Ty has done the only thing that is permissible.

**VI.3 Regarding moral normativity:** Snidely Whiplash decides to kill his archenemy Dudley Do Right. So Snidely ties Dudley to the railroad tracks, climbs in a stopped, empty train, and drives it toward Dudley. As the locomotive barrels down the hill toward noble (if simple) Dudley, Snidely has an epiphany. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, the error of his ways is at once clear to Snidely. Unfortunately, it is now too late to stop the train. As luck would have it, however, there is a switch that Snidely can throw that will make the train take an alternative track. This is very good news for Dudley, but it is not good news for his faithful horse (who is named "Horse") that is standing in the middle of the side track and will be killed. Snidely throws the switch, Dudley is saved, and it is curtains for poor Horse.

Now suppose our job is to morally evaluate Snidely's killing of Horse. If we accept moral mentalism—i.e., a synchronic theory of moral evaluation—we should reason as follows. What matters in the evaluation of Snidely's conduct (i.e., in deciding whether his action is morally permissible) are Snidely's beliefs and desires at the moment he flips the switch and heads toward Horse. Being good synchronists, we should think of the matter this way. Whatever we say about Snidely's culpability we should have to say also about Swamp Snidely (that is, the person who has no history but who finds himself in an ahistorically-construed psychological state and in a situation exactly like Snidely's). Now, surely, we would find Swamp Snidely's action justified. As Swamp Snidely looks at Dudley, Horse, and the Switch, he does the only thing that would be morally acceptable—he sacrifices Horse to save Dudley. But if that is right, then given moral mentalism, we must make the same verdict regarding the original Snidely. Moral mentalism entails that we give the same evaluation of Snidely that we would give of Swamp Snidely. Since we find the latter's actions permissible, we must find Snidely's action equally morally in the clear.

Taken together, then, these three cases enable us to evaluate moral, skill, and prudential normativity from the appropriate analog of mentalism in epistemology. If one adopts this synchronic perspective, then each actor that we've considered has been justified in what she or he does. As one might say, given that each person is in the situation he or she is in, what else was there to do?

As I stated earlier, my goal here is not to deny that evidentialist evaluations are wrong, exactly. There may be contexts in which they are of interest (and we'll

come back to this presently). However given that there are a plethora of concepts of epistemic appraisal, we shouldn't expect each of them to be equally central to epistemological theorizing. What I hope the three examples indicate is that in those other normative domains, the results that we get from appraising actions from synchronic perspective don't seem to be particularly interesting. Surely, the overriding attitude to take toward Snidely is that he is not justified in having killed Horse even if there was then nothing better, and something worse, he could have done (since the train he was driving could not stop before smashing into either Dudley or Horse). Similarly, Sally is on balance practically irrational to turn in such a half-baked report given that it might well cost her her job, even if she might have done something even more irrational. And Ty's excuse that, once he was caught too far off the base there was nothing better to do than run to second, will likely do little to calm his angry manager.

Normative evaluations are important in many domains. We want to know what is the right thing to do, what is the best way to perform a certain skill, and what we are to do to further our own best interests. These are important questions and the way we evaluate our actions is of both practical and theoretical importance. But in none of these domains are we particularly interested in the evaluations of our actions along synchronic lines. There may be occasions when such evaluations matter, but they are not the evaluations in which our normative judgments tend to reside. Normative evaluations are typically historical evaluations. That one is justified performing a given action is, in part, a function of what one has done prior to action in question.

In a spirit of ecumenical good-naturedness, I have granted that there are contexts in which synchronic evaluations matter. Here, I don't have in mind Swamp Person cases and this is so for two reasons. First, because they never happen so they aren't contexts we care about. More importantly, although I've treated them as though they are synchronic, I don't think Swamp People cases provide counterexamples to the view that normative evaluation is diachronic. For Swamp People's entire histories *are* relevant to the actions in question—it's just that their history is so short. But we aren't arbitrarily limiting our evaluation to include only their states just prior to the action in question.

The kinds of cases that seem to me the best potential examples for the friend of synchronic evaluation are those in which the person has had a change of heart and has resolved to "do better from now on." If Snidely really has seen the error of his ways and is determined to stop tying people to railroad tracks, we might be inclined to cut him a bit of slack since, in a way, he is a changed person and his diverting the train so that it kills Horse instead of Dudley is an indication of that. Since he has made his new commitment to live a good life, he has done the best he could.

At the risk of taking back the bone I have thrown mentalism, I should note that Snidely's change of heart doesn't excuse Snidely from being morally responsible for killing Horse. Still, I do think there is something to this point. Past wrong doing can sometimes be forgiven or at least mitigated by true repentance. But rather than its being in favor of the synchronist's position, I think that ultimately these evaluations are no less diachronic than are our more standard evaluations. What is

of interest, what is being evaluated, in this case is post-conversion Snidely. Yet this evaluation will be diachronic. Like the Swamp People examples, the fact that there is yet only a single moment doesn't mean that the nature of the evaluation is synchronic. It's just that all the time it ranges over is terrifically small.

### Section VII. An Objection

One motivation for adopting mentalism in epistemology, and synchronism in normative contexts generally, is that what is past is fixed and hence no longer in anyone's control. But if factors over which an agent has no control limit her options to two, and she does the better of the two options because it is the better option, then she can't be blamed for failing to do something other than what she has done. That is, synchronic normative theories are compatible with a robust "ought implies can" principle in a way that diachronic theories aren't. As I have noted, in each of the three non-epistemic cases we've looked at, the agent might reasonably say, "Given the situation I was in just before I acted, what else could I have done? I did the best thing in the circumstance." So if a robust "ought implies can" principle undergirds normative evaluation, then we should be synchronists generally and mentalists in particular.

This objection goes wrong in a few places. First, there certainly are significant forms of normative evaluation that do not imply any kind of "ought implies can" principle. Consider Ty's case. One way of telling it has him being careless and taking a bigger lead than he knows he should take. But the details needn't include any kind of blame or fault. He might be very inexperienced, and

doing everything that could be expected of him (diachronically construed!). Still, his getting caught with too big a lead is a mistake; he is not doing what is necessary for exercising the skill of base stealing. This is so even if Ty is not to be blamed for his error. This point is particularly apt when it comes to the epistemic evaluation of belief. For belief is not an action and is not typically under any significant control of the agent. So if we are evaluating the belief—particularly if we are gauging how well it fits with the agent’s evidence, we would be advised to not take the evaluation to imply an “ought implies can” principle.

Yet even in normative domains in which an “ought implies can” principle is plausible, it is surely not as broad as is being construed by the objector and for reasons that we have seen: Snidely is blameworthy for killing Horse even though, at the moment he hit the switch, that was the best action available to him. So a more plausible principle would be “ought implies can or could have.” Note that the ought/can principle that is plausible is diachronic—what matters is whether the agent now has or has had the option of doing what she ought.

### Section VIII: Diachronic Evidentialism

Let’s take stock. F&C evidentialism entails mentalism—i.e., that only mental states the person has at the time of the evaluation of a belief are relevant for epistemic evaluation. Because I don’t think there is any single, coherent ordinary concept of epistemic justification, I don’t think that F&C evidentialism should be construed as a theory of that. So I take it to be an account of one of many epistemic

goods. The issue, as I see it, is how good a good it is. But synchronic evaluations in contexts of prudential rationality, the performance of skills, and morality are mostly uninteresting or at least not particularly significant. So why should we think matters are different when it comes to epistemic evaluation? And given the Problem of Irresponsibility, we have reason to think that F&C evidentialist epistemic evaluation is not particularly important either: if one's evidence is compromised by irresponsibility in evidence collection, then a belief's being well-grounded on the evidence one has isn't particularly significant.

I want to conclude by (perhaps arrogantly) offering a suggestion to the evidentialist. Go diachronic! There is nothing in the main idea of evidentialism that requires its ill-advised commitment to mentalism. I take it that what is really crucial for the evidentialist is that whatever the epistemic good is that he's trying to articulate be expressible in fundamentally evidential terms. And that can be done just as easily with a diachronic theory.

We've seen two problems for synchronic evidentialism: the problem of forgotten evidence and the objection from irresponsibility. The first issue is clearly an issue about relationship between evidence one has or has had, and the proposition in question. Evidentialism can handle this problem in either of two ways. One might claim that the epistemic status of a belief or proposition for a person is a function of evidence the person has or has had. Spelling out the details of this might be difficult, however, because the theory will have to avoid the implication that a belief that is formed after the evidence for it has been forgotten can nevertheless be justified (or whatever term of evaluation we are using).



Alternatively, the evidentialist might distinguish the conditions of appropriately *forming* a belief (i.e., coming to believe) from the conditions of appropriately *maintaining* a belief (i.e., continuing to believe). The conditions for the former could be stated pretty much as the evidentialist has always stated them (remember that now we are just trying to give an account that doesn't have the problem of forgotten evidence) and conditions for the latter will be that the belief have had a proper evidential grounding when initially believed (or since) and that there not be any new evidence that, taken with the earlier evidence, would not properly evidentially ground the belief. With both newly formed and continuing beliefs, it is only the evidence that is had or was had that is relevant to the epistemic evaluation of the belief.

What about the Problem of Irresponsibility? One possibility is that the evidentialist will claim that matters of responsibility aren't germane to evidentialist evaluation. The epistemic good of responsibly acquired and maintained belief, and that of belief that is appropriately attuned to one's evidence, are just separate goods (notice, though, that this will involve giving up on the idea that there is a single notion of epistemic justification that each theorist is trying to explicate). On the other hand, how one collects evidence and how receptive one is to new evidence when it is present to one are both matters the evidentialist might care about. And it would seem that she has the conceptual resources to include them in her account. Once the evidentialist is freed from the constraints of mentalism, she can take on board that the evidential evaluation of beliefs might be in part of function of how the agent has sought after and incorporated evidence into her cognitive perspective.

Lastly, let me note that going diachronic is consistent with a relatively strong form of internalism. This can be seen by considering standard Demon World cases. Internalists insist that our doppelgängers at Demon Worlds have justified beliefs that parallel our justified beliefs (and certain forms of externalism will deny this). But any world at which you have a psychological history that is indistinguishable from the one you have at this world, will be a world at which your beliefs will be equally diachronically evidentially supported. There will be kinds of Demon World cases where that won't be true—a world in which you've just come into existence with a set of memories as of a past might be a world in which your belief that Battle of Fort Sumter was the first battle of the Civil War is not evaluated positively from the a diachronic evidential perspective (although it isn't obvious that even in those cases there isn't a work around for the diachronic evidentialist).<sup>12</sup>

So, as far as I can tell, the diachronic evidentialist can have everything in her theory that the evidentialist should have wanted all along. The theoretical gains are significant and the costs non-existent.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Frise 2014 for an objection to diachronic accounts of the justification of memory beliefs that is grounded in Demon World Problems.

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