*Evidentialism & Normative Expectations*

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Abstract:

In this paper I examine a recent incarnation of common objection to evidentialism. According to this common objection, evidentialism gives the wrong verdicts in cases where the subject has been irresponsible in inquiry. Sandy Goldberg (2021) has argued that a particularly vivid instance of this problem occurs when an individual violates normative expectations that have been placed on them in their inquiry. Having laid out Goldberg’s case, I argue that the desirable verdicts can be better attained by endorsing evidentialism and supplementing it with an account of robust justification that I have defended elsewhere.

*Introduction*

In this paper I examine a recent incarnation of a common objection to evidentialism. According to this common objection, evidentialism gives the wrong verdicts in cases where the subject has been irresponsible in their inquiry. Recently, Sandy Goldberg (2021) has argued that a particularly vivid instance of this problem occurs when an individual violates appropriate normative expectations that have been placed on them in their inquiry. According to Goldberg, such cases give us reason to endorse the phenomenon of normative defeat, and in doing so we must also reject evidentialism, since normative defeat gives epistemic significance to unpossessed evidence. Having laid out Goldberg’s case, I argue that the desirable verdicts can be better attained by endorsing evidentialism and supplementing it with an account of robust justification that I have defended elsewhere. This alternative explanation gets the core cases right, while also avoiding a number of intuitive costs that come with Goldberg’s proposal.

*What is Evidentialism?*

Evidentialism is a thesis about epistemic justification, the kind of justification necessary for knowledge. As Conee and Feldman (1985) have canonically put it,

 EJ Doxastic attitude D toward proposition p is epistemically justified for S at t if and only if having D toward p fits S’s evidence at t. (15)

For the past 40 years, evidentialism has been a thesis at the heart of numerous epistemological debates. Like much of philosophy, there is a sense in which the debates surrounding evidentialism have progressed, and a sense in which they have not. For instance, many of the types of objections lobbied against evidentialism at the outset are the same types of objections that are advanced against the view today. Of course, these objections have developed and evolved, but the central worries remain largely the same.

To my mind, the most powerful of these objections concern irresponsible inquiry. As Conee and Feldman (1985) point out,

EJ has no implication about the actions one must take in a rational pursuit of the truth. It is about the epistemic evaluation of attitudes given the evidence one does have, however one came to possess that evidence… Justified beliefs can result from epistemically irresponsible actions.” (22)

Many have found this consequence of evidentialism untenable.[[1]](#footnote-1) They point to cases of irresponsible inquiry where the subject should have had (and easily could have had) different evidence, in an attempt to provide a counterexample to EJ. Goldberg (2021) has offered a recent incarnation of this objection that focuses on the normative expectations that we place on each other in inquiry. In the next section, we will examine Goldberg’s objection in detail.

*Normative Expectations in Inquiry*

We have expectations of each other, and some of these expectations are epistemic in nature. We expect our pharmacists to be aware of side-effects of various drugs, we expect our lawyers to be familiar with the law, and we expect our students to have read the syllabus. In each of these cases we have expectations regarding the epistemic state of someone else: we expect them to have certain evidence, beliefs, and even knowledge. These expectations can be grounded in any number of ways. Some such expectations might be grounded by professional norms (the pharmacist), others by moral norms (you promised to look something up for a friend). While not every epistemic expectation may be legitimate, many are. That is, we are often *entitled* to have such expectations of each other. Often, the standard that we are holding others to is an appropriate epistemic standard (whether it be grounded by morality, one’s profession, etc.). Goldberg’s central claim is that these legitimate epistemic expectations are epistemically significant, and that their significance is telling against evidentialism. We can think of Goldberg’s argument as an inference to the best explanation. Once we appreciate that legitimate epistemic expectations have significance, we need to explain it, and the best explanation of this will be incompatible with evidentialism.

Goldberg gives a number of cases to help motivate his point. Here we will examine just one, granting to Goldberg that the same phenomenon is mirrored across a wider variety of cases.

THE NOTE

Jackie and Jill have been married for years. They have a longstanding

practice wherein they leave stick-it notes on the refrigerator door when

they run out of something, so that they have a running list of what they

need to buy the next time one of them goes shopping. Each expects the

other to consult with the note, and so to know of its contents, before

leaving for the market. (86)

The first upshot of this case is that it illustrates a legitimate epistemic expectation. Jackie and Jill are each entitled to expect the other party to be in a particular epistemic state before going to the market. This expectation is grounded in their well-established practice. The second upshot is that these expectations are also epistemically significant; they factor into our epistemic evaluations of the individual in question. To see this, consider the following elaboration on the case.

THE NOTE CONTINUED

As it happens, Jackie fails to attend to the note on the refrigerator door,

and so she fails to see that they are out of milk. Consequently when she

goes to the market, she fails to purchase milk, and when she defends her

view by saying she thought the only thing they needed were apples—the

only thing that was on the list when Jackie consulted it three days ago—

Jill is unimpressed. Jill judges that because Jackie bears responsibility for

not knowing that they needed milk, she had no right to believe that they

only needed apples. (88)

According to Goldberg, the relevant normative expectations ground several things. First, Jill’s expectations ground a negative assessment of the individual in question, Jackie. Jackie was irresponsible and did not behave as she should. But, second, Jill’s expectations also indict Jackie’s *belief* that only apples were needed from the market. This belief is epistemically defective due to Jackie’s failure to live up to the legitimate normative expectations that Jill had of her. Goldberg sees this verdict as a problem for ‘the traditionalist’, which is to include the evidentialist, since they can only find an epistemic defect with the belief if there is some problem relative to the evidence that the subject has in their possession at the time of evaluation. But in our case, Jackie’s belief does fit her evidence at that time. For simplicity, let’s just consider time t as the time when Jackie is checking out at the market. At t, Jackie is not aware of the note on the fridge that included milk. At t, Jackie’s evidence points to only apples being needed at the store.

According to Goldberg, we are left with several options in diagnosing the case:

Option 1: *No Epistemic Flaw* - identify the *subject* as flawed and irresponsible, but give the *belief* in question no negative epistemic evaluation since it fits the subject’s evidence at the time.

 Option 2: *Epistemic Flaw* - identify a flaw with both the *subject* and their *belief*.

Goldberg finds three problems with Option 1. First, Option 1 ignores that our negative assessments in such cases go beyond the person and attach to the relevant beliefs as well. In THE NOTE CONTINUED, Jill has a negative assessment of Jackie’s *belief*, not just Jackie’s behavior or Jackie as an individual. After all, since it was Jackie’s irresponsibility that led to the belief, the negative assessment of her behavior seems to affect our assessment of the resulting belief as well. Her belief that was formed in an irresponsible way, and irresponsible belief formation looks like a kind of epistemic flaw. Second, Option 1 appears to require one to accept moral encroachment or doxastic wronging in order to avoid other unpleasant verdicts. Goldberg gives the following case adapted from Gendler (2011):

ETHICS CONTINUED

Janet is a member of an exclusive club, the vast majority of whose members are white, and the vast majority of whose staff are Black. When Janet sees Roger, a well-dressed Black man, at the club she assumes he is staff and so she asks him to retrieve her jacket from the coat room. However, Roger is one of the few Black members of the club. He is upset at her assumption that he is a member of the staff. (94)

In this case, we might feel an even stronger urge to criticize the subject’s *belief*. While there are normative expectations that Janet has violated, like being cognizant of the basic moral features of one’s circumstances, if we endorse Option 1, such a violation is not epistemically significant and does not result in a negative assessment of her belief. So, if we are to criticize Janet’s belief, the criticism must be grounded elsewhere. The doctrines of doxastic wronging (the idea that we can wrong someone with our beliefs) and moral encroachment (the idea that epistemic assessments are to be sensitive to moral features) offer two possible ways to ground a negative assessment of Janet’s belief. Goldberg’s point is that for those who do not find doxastic wronging or moral encroachment plausible, they are left without the resources to criticize Janet’s belief, and that this is a cost.

The third, and final, problem with Option 1 given by Goldberg is that there is a better option, namely Option 2. While Goldberg examines several possible ways of filling out Option 2,[[2]](#footnote-2) Goldberg’s preferred elaboration relies on the phenomenon of normative defeat[[3]](#footnote-3).

NORMATIVE DEFEAT

If (i) at time t, S believes that p on the basis of evidence E, (ii) the proposition that p is propositionally justified on E, (iii) others are entitled to have normative epistemic expectations of S at t related to S’s belief that p, (iv) if S were to have satisfied these expectations S would have had a body of evidence E\* at t, (v) the proposition that p is not propositionally justified on the body of evidence that includes both E and E\*, and (vi) at t, S does not possess E\*, then the justification for S’s belief that p is normatively defeated. (99)

According to Goldberg, violating a legitimate epistemic expectation opens one up for normative defeat. If fulfilling such an expectation would have given one defeating evidence, then even though one currently lacks that evidence, the justification for their belief has been normatively defeated, and thus the belief is not epistemically justified.[[4]](#footnote-4) Since in THE NOTE CONTINUED, Jackie would have gained evidence that they needed more than apples were she to have lived up to the legitimate epistemic expectations placed on her, her belief that they only need apples is normatively defeated. Beliefs that are normatively defeated are epistemically flawed – they are not justified. So, on Goldberg’s preferred assessment, Jackie’s belief is not epistemically justified, despite the fact that it fits the evidence that she has in her possession at the time in question, t. If all that is right, then we have a counterexample to EJ.

*An Initial Evidentialist Defense*

The evidentialist is not without resources to come to the verdict that the belief in question is not epistemically justified. Goldberg recognizes that one way the evidentialist might respond is to make the case that the subject’s evidence does not actually support what the case supposes. In our target case, this would amount to claiming that Jackie’s evidence does *not* support the belief that apples are the only item needed from the store at t. As Goldberg notes, when there are normative expectations of an individual, they are typically aware of those expectations, and this will make an evidential difference. (90) For instance, in plausible ways of filling out the vignette, Jackie’s evidence supports that Jill has certain expectations of her. Jackie’s evidence also supports that items on the post-it note often change within a three-day period. These bits of evidence can at least make it less clear that her belief is epistemically justified.[[5]](#footnote-5)

While this evidentialist maneuver might apply in a wide variety of cases, in order to adequately account for the phenomenon, it would need to be that in *every* such case we can find there is such an evidential deficiency. Like Goldberg, I find this unlikely. Here is a plausible case he gives:

PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY CONTINUED

Minh spent most of last year getting up to speed on the parts of the law that bear on the lawsuit. At the time he finished this research, he was fully apprized. A year has passed since that time. While Minh knows that the law does change occasionally, he also knows that this area of law does not change very often. What is more, he was assured by a colleague he trusts that there have been no new relevant developments in this part of the law since last year. Minh accepts this, and so acquires the belief that there have been no new relevant developments in this part of the law since last year. Unfortunately, his trusted colleague was wrong: an important change has taken place in the interim. (92-93)

In this case, Minh’s higher-order evidence, her evidence about her commitments and what epistemic effects violating her commitments might have, does not seem to affect what her total evidence supports. Since changes are quite unlikely, and it hasn’t been that long since she last checked, he lacks reasons to think that things are any different now. Nevertheless, Minh has still violated legitimate normative expectations of her. The expectations placed on her are not simply that she check for new developments if she gains reason to think that there have been. She has a responsibility to check *even when her evidence supports that no such changes exist*. If there is nevertheless an epistemic flaw with Minh’s belief, then this initial evidentialist defense is inadequate.[[6]](#footnote-6)

*A Different Evidentialist Assessment*

In what follows I want to motivate a different assessment of these core cases where legitimate epistemic expectations have been unfulfilled, one that is compatible with evidentialism. In Goldberg’s discussion of the options, he seems to assume that the evidentialist can only find an epistemic flaw with the belief in question if there is a problem with that belief’s fit with the subject’s current evidence. Let’s call such a view ‘empire evidentialism’ since it seeks to make *every* epistemic assessment an assessment of fit with the subject’s evidence.

 EE Every epistemic flaw with a belief is accounted for by its failing to fit the subject’s evidence at that time.

There are two things to note about empire evidentialism. First, empire evidentialism is not at all plausible. Second, empire evidentialism is a *much* stronger claim than evidentialism. Let’s look at each note in turn. First, empire evidentialism is not plausible. There are many negative epistemic assessments of a belief that are not to be understood simply in terms of failures to fit with the subject’s evidence at the time. Take a case where a subject fails to know a proposition. Failing to be knowledge is a kind of negative epistemic evaluation of a belief – it’s not knowledge, and it would be epistemically better if it was. One reason a subject’s belief may fail to be knowledge is that it is not supported by their evidence. Empire evidentialism can account for such cases. However, the belief in question may fail to be knowledge for a number of other reasons. For instance, the belief in question might be false, or the subject might be gettiered and fail to know for that reason. The lesson is that not every way of failing to know is a failure to believe in accordance with one’s evidence. In addition, a belief can fail to be doxastically justified (or well-founded[[7]](#footnote-7)). This too is a negative epistemic assessment of a belief, it fails to have a better epistemic assessment. A belief can fail to be doxastically justified even if the attitude in question fits the subject’s evidence at the time. It could fail to be doxastically justified because it is not properly based. So, not every negative epistemic assessment of a belief is to be made in terms of that belief not fitting the subject’s evidence – empire evidentialism is implausible. Second, evidentialism does not entail empire evidentialism. Evidentialism is simply a thesis about epistemic justification, the kind of justification required for knowledge. Evidentialism is not committed to the idea that epistemic justification is the only epistemic evaluation to be made. Straightforwardly, evidentialists often talk about doxastic justification (well-foundedness) and knowledge, but evidentialism is also compatible with other epistemic assessments of a belief as well. Further still, evidentialism is not even committed to the idea that assessments of epistemic justification are the most important epistemic evaluations to be made. Those are the assessments that evidentialism makes, but no part of evidentialism indicates the primacy of those assessments.

Elsewhere, Matheson (2020), I have defended an account of robust justification, a different kind of epistemic assessment.

RJ’ Doxastic attitude D toward proposition p is *robustly justified* for S at t if and only if (i) having D toward p fits the evidence S has at t (it meets EJ) and (ii) S has been responsible in gathering evidence relevant to p. (154)

While robust justification is compatible with evidentialism, it is an epistemic evaluation that outstrips any evidentialist verdicts. So, appealing to robust justification allows for an evidentialist-friendly epistemic assessment to be made that goes beyond a doxastic attitude fitting a subject’s evidence at that time. Robust justification is a distinct kind of epistemic justification. It is not the kind of justification that is necessary for knowledge. Consider the following case:

SALLY’S SPOILER

Sally is a big Bears fan. She has been travelling and missed the last game. She has worked hard to avoid any information about the game by disabling her phone and avoiding T.V. and radio, so that she can watch the game when she gets home. Unfortunately for Sally, she has a mean friend – Suzy. Suzy is a Packers fan and so wants to make Sally’s life miserable. Aware of Sally’s plan, Suzy foils her plans and blurts out the final score despite Sally’s best efforts to avoid her testimony. (Matheson 2020, 150)

In this case, Sally has not been a responsible inquirer. In fact, Sally has actively been avoiding information. Despite her irresponsible inquiry, Sally knows the outcome of the game on the basis of Suzy’s testimony. What this shows is that responsible inquiry, and thereby robust justification, is not a necessary condition on knowledge. Irresponsible inquiry can nevertheless result in knowledge. So, the value of robust justification is independent of any connection to knowledge. The kind of justification in RJ’ is not the same as the kind in EJ.

Let’s see how the notion of robust justification applies to our central case. In THE NOTE CONTINUED, Jackie’s belief that apples are the only item needed from the store fits her evidence (at t), but her evidence (at t) is not the result of responsible inquiry. After all, Jackie failed to responsibly check the post-it notes on the refrigerator door. So, Jackie’s belief, is not robustly justified. Jackie’s belief is not robustly justified, despite the fact that it is epistemically justified according to EJ. So long as robust justification is not the same type of epistemic justification as referenced in EJ, namely the kind required for knowledge, there is no conflict with a belief being epistemically justified while failing to be robustly justified.

Bringing this all together, appealing to robust justification gives the evidentialist a way of endorsing Option 2, the epistemic flaw option, without denying EJ. According to this line of thought, Jackie’s belief is epistemically flawed, it is just that the epistemic flaw in question is not that her belief is not epistemically justified (in the sense required by knowledge). The epistemic flaw lies elsewhere, it is not robustly justified. Since empire evidentialism is false, the evidentialist needn’t identify each and every epistemic flaw as a failure to respond correctly to the subject’s evidence. Jackie’s belief, though epistemically justified, is not robustly justified, and failing to be robustly justified is an epistemic flaw with her belief.

*Assessing the Explanations*

Thus far we have gained some intuitive data about cases like THE NOTE CONTINUED, and we now have two candidate competitor explanations of that data. According to Goldberg, we should embrace the notion of normative defeat in order to account for these intuitions, and reject evidentialism in the process. According to the above proposal, we should stick with evidentialism, and endorse the notion of robust justification to account for the data. Why opt for robust justification over normative defeat? Let’s take stock. Both explanations can diagnose an epistemic failing in Jackie’s belief, in addition to any negative evaluation of Jackie herself. That is to say, both explanations opt for Option 2, the epistemic flaw option. Each explanation relies on a different epistemic flaw: normative defeat or a lack of robust justification. In doing so, each explanation posits a relatively new epistemic phenomenon. One offers a novel kind of defeat (one involving unpossessed evidence), the other offers a novel kind of epistemic justification (one not required for knowledge). So, both explanations do something that deviates from epistemic tradition by positing a new type of epistemic phenomenon. That said, there are numerous clear advantages for the explanation that utilizes robust justification.

One advantage for our robust justification explanation is that it preserves a kind of symmetry regarding what evidence matters. According to evidentialism, it is only the evidence *possessed* by the subject that is relevant to what they are justified in believing. Different versions of evidentialism can give different accounts of what it takes for evidence to be possessed, but all evidentialist accounts maintain that it is only the subject’s evidence that matters. Our account of robust justification preserves the idea that only possessed evidence makes a justificatory difference. The difference with robust justification is that it also requires that the evidence one possesses is the result of responsible inquiry. In contrast, Goldberg’s account of normative defeat lets *unpossessed* evidence have a defeating effect. It is evidence that one would have had were one to have fulfilled their normative commitments that can play a defeating role. While Goldberg’s account of normative defeat sees unpossessed evidence that one would have had were they to have fulfilled their normative commitments as epistemically significant, it does not see *all* such evidence as epistemically significant. On his account, such unpossessed evidence can only play a defeating role. Such unpossessed evidence that would further *support* the belief in question has no role to play and is not epistemically significant. So, a cost of Goldberg’s explanation is that it must build in a strange kind of asymmetry between supporting evidence and defeating evidence. On his account, supporting evidence must be possessed, while defeating evidence need not be. This is a significant intuitive cost.[[8]](#footnote-8)

A second advantage concerns the same evidence principle. According to the same evidence principle, individuals that have the same total body of evidence are justified in adopting the same doxastic attitudes toward the same propositions. Put differently, according to the same evidence principle, there is not a justificatory difference without an evidential difference. Goldberg’s proposal, unlike the proposal being advanced here, must reject the same evidence principle. Goldberg’s account of normative defeat comes at the cost of denying the same evidence principle. After all, two individuals can have the same total body of evidence, yet each be held to different legitimate normative expectations. Given these different normative expectations, the justification of one’s belief may be normatively defeated while the justification for the other’s belief is not. So, despite the fact that the two individuals have the same total body of evidence, what doxastic attitude they are justified in adopting regarding some target proposition differs. The same evidence principle is quite intuitive, so denying it is an explanatory cost.

One particularly troubling way to see the costs of Goldberg’s explanation is by thinking of a case where the normative expectations in question cease to exist. We can see this by building on another of Goldberg’s examples which concerns the legitimate normative expectations that clients have of their lawyer. In particular, clients legitimately expect their lawyer to be knowledgeable about the parts of the law that bear on their case. (86) With this in mind, consider the following way of filling out Goldberg’s initial thought:

LENNY THE LAWYER

Lenny the lawyer’s evidence supports that his clients are liable. However, Lenny has not fulfilled the legitimate normative expectations that his clients have of him to be familiar with the relevant aspects of the law. Had Lenny fulfilled these expectations, he would have encountered overwhelming evidence that his clients are in fact not liable.

As it stands, Goldberg’s account has it that Lenny’s belief that his clients are liable is normatively defeated, and thus that Lenny is not justified in believing the proposition that his clients are liable. However, consider the following elaboration on the case:

LENNY THE LAWYER CONTINTUED

Lenny’s clients are indecisive. Having hired the lawyer several weeks ago, they get cold feet. They call Lenny’s office and leave a message with the office that they no longer need Lenny’s services. Since they have relieved Lenny of his duties, they cease to have any expectations of Lenny. Given that these were Lenny’s only clients dealing with this particular legal issue, Lenny is no longer expected to be familiar with these aspects of the law. However, before Lenny even receives the message, the clients change their mind again, call the office back, and tell the receptionist to ignore the previous message. They now plan on continuing to use Lenny’s services and their expectations of him have been renewed.

On Goldberg’s account, the indecisiveness of Lenny’s clients has some extraordinary epistemic ramifications for Lenny. As his client’s expectations of him come and go, so does Lenny’s justification for believing that his clients are liable. While those expectations exist, Lenny’s belief is normatively defeated. When those expectations cease, the justification for Lenny’s belief is restored since the normative defeater has been removed. On this picture, the justification for Lenny’s belief is quite unstable, despite the fact that Lenny is unaware of any of these developments. This is another mark against Goldberg’s favored explanation of our data.

A third advantage of our robust justification explanation is that it can also explain phenomenon left unexplained by Goldberg’s competitor proposal. Consider the following case:

THE TALE OF TWO STUDENTS

Pat and Kat are two economists. They have each been tasked with the project of determining whether the newly proposed tax plan will in fact be revenue neutral. The tax bill is quite complicated and its effects on the economy are no simple matter. However, both Pat and Kat are skilled economists well qualified to determine the matter. Kat has been dutifully researching the matter for a month. Pat has been enjoying the World Cup. One night at a bar where Pat had been watching the match, Kat comes in after another long day of research and sits down in the booth next to Pat. Pat overhears Kat telling her friend that she has concluded that the new plan will add to the deficit. Pat, knowing of Kat’s credentials, also comes to believe that the plan will add to the deficit. (Matheson 2020, 152)

We can suppose that both Pat and Kat are epistemically justified in their beliefs, and even that each is an item of knowledge. Kat has correctly responded to her responsibly acquired evidence, and Pat has correctly responded to the strong testimonial evidence that she acquired. While both Pat and Kat are justified in their belief about the new tax plan (and we can even suppose equally so), Pat’s belief has an epistemic defect that Kat’s does not. Appealing to robust justification can capture this verdict. Since Kat, but not Pat, conducted responsible inquiry, Kat’s belief enjoys robust justification while Pat’s does not. While Pat did not fulfil the legitimate normative expectations that were placed on her, there needn’t have been evidence that she would have come to possess that would defeat the justification for her belief. In fact, we can suppose that her responsible inquiry would have yielded the same total body of evidence as Kat’s responsible inquiry. Since Pat is a knower, her belief is epistemically justified (an undefeated). So, appealing to normative defeat cannot capture the intuitive epistemic difference between Pat and Kat, while appealing to the notion of robust justification can. This is a further advantage of the robust justification proposal.

A fourth advantage for our robust justification explanation has to do with the fact that it offers answers about the case where Goldberg’s alternative fails to. According to our explanation that pairs EJ about epistemic justification with a notion of robust justification, before learning of her error Jackie is epistemically justified in believing that apples are the only item needed from the store. That is, belief is the appropriate doxastic attitude for her to have toward that proposition at time t. After all, belief is the attitude that fits her evidence at that time. While her belief is not robustly justified, belief is the appropriate attitude for her to have. In contrast, Goldberg’s account of normative defeat has it that the justification Jackie had for believing that apples are the only item needed from the store is normatively defeated by the evidence she should have had (the evidence she would have were she to have fulfilled the legitimate normative expectations placed on her). Since her justification for believing only apples are needed is defeated on this picture, belief can’t be the right doxastic attitude for her to have towards that proposition. But if not belief, then what doxastic attitude should Jackie have toward this proposition? Suspension of judgment does not seem appropriate. After all, Jackie has strong reasons in favor of the proposition, and possesses no evidence against it. Disbelief is an even less plausible option. This answer could be motivated if unpossessed evidence that one should have had could have both positive and negative epistemic effects. However, from her perspective, disbelieving this proposition has nothing to recommend it. It is an implausible verdict.[[9]](#footnote-9) So, our robust justification explanation avoids unanswered questions left by Goldberg’s alternative proposal. This is a further explanatory advantage.

A fifth advantage comes from implausible verdicts that Goldberg’s normative defeat explanation gives regarding different sorts of cases. We have already seen one such type of case with LENNY THE LAWYER, but a second type of problematic case concerns instances where there are very high normative expectations. Consider the following:

EDITH THE EDITOR

Edith is a senior editor at a renowned publisher. She has copyedited countless books. In her role she is expected to carefully scrutinize every sentence of every manuscript, ensuring their grammatical correctness. Every manuscript draft that Edith has encountered has had at least some errors. Edith recently received a new lengthy manuscript. She is expected to meticulously go through the manuscript and report on the changes needed. The reporting process is a two-part process. First, Edith must simply report whether there are any changes needed. Second, if there are changes needed, Edith must report on the particular edits necessary. It’s a long bureaucratic process, so the earlier step-one is completed, the smoother the process. Even though it is expected that Edith carefully reviews the manuscript before submitting her step-one report, doing so creates unnecessary delays, so she often skips doing so. After all, every manuscript she has seen has required edits, so she often saves the extensive review for later. Given this evidence, Edith believes that this manuscript also contains errors and reports her belief in her step-one report. In this case, however, remarkably no edits to the manuscript are actually needed, and had Edith carefully reviewed the manuscript she would have discovered this fact.

On Goldberg’s account of normative defeat, Edith’s belief that the manuscript contains errors is normatively defeated; she is not justified in her belief. The evidence that she would have had were she to have fulfilled the legitimate normative expectations placed on her defeats the justification for her belief. What makes this verdict particularly problematic is that while the expectations placed on Edith are relative to a particular context, the normative defeat occurs across all contexts. So, we can imagine Edith going home for the night and reporting to her neighbor Stanley that she just received a new manuscript with errors that she will be working to fix this next weekend. Even outside of this professional context, Goldberg’s account of normative defeat has it that Edith’s belief is not justified. The fact that Stanley has no such expectations of her does not matter. In contrast, the robust justification alternative can give a different diagnosis of the case. On this alternative picture, Edith’s belief that the new manuscript has errors is epistemically justified, though not robustly justified. This explains why we think that her belief is a perfectly appropriate thing for her to think, even though it is lacking in some other way.

*Conclusion*

Inquiry is epistemically significant. How one conducts inquiry can affect the epistemic status of the resulting beliefs. Neither of these facts should be taken as reasons to reject evidentialism. Once we are careful to distinguish evidentialism from the implausible empire evidentialism, we can see that the evidentialist verdicts needn’t exhaust all of the epistemic verdicts. My account of robust justification is another plausible epistemic verdict that is both compatible with evidentialism and can capture the intuition that responsible inquiry is epistemically significant. We have seen many reasons why opting for robust justification better explains our intuitive data than Goldberg’s alternative proposal involving normative defeat. Long live evidentialism.

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1. See for instance Kornblith (1983), Baehr (2011), Cloos (2015), and Mirachi (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. He also considers versions that incorporate pragmatic encroachment and the relevance of easily accessible evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Goldberg credits Lackey (1999) for introducing the notion of normative defeat into the literature, which he has since refined. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For simplicity we will set aside cases of partial defeat. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This evidence about the subject’s evidence is often referred to as ‘higher-order evidence’. For a discussion of its epistemic significance, see Matheson (2009). Like in cases of disagreement, the higher-order evidence here may be seen as defeating evidence. See also Matheson (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. While the intuition that there is an epistemic flaw with Minh’s belief may be weaker than the intuition that there is a flaw with Jackie’s belief, in Matheson (2020) I examine other cases that illustrate the need to make additional epistemic assessments beyond the evidentialist assessments. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Conee and Feldman (1985), p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Evidential symmetry could be restored were Goldberg to claim that supporting evidence that one would have had were they to have fulfilled the legitimate normative expectations placed on them is also epistemically significant. Such a move would restore evidential symmetry, but it would come at the cost of further removing the significance of the subject’s perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. While one might eschew a tripartite doxastic taxonomy, appealing to degrees of belief or a credence does not appear to help Goldberg’s explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)