**Robust Justification**

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Forthcoming in K. McCain & S. Stapleford (eds.) *Epistemic Duties: New Arguments, New Angles*. Routledge.

According to evidentialism, a subject is justified in believing a proposition at a time, just in case their evidence on balance supports that proposition at that time. Evidentialist justification is thus a property of fit – fitting the subject’s evidence. However, evidentialism does not evaluate the subject’s evidence beyond this relation of fit. For instance, evidentialism ignores whether the subject was responsible or negligent in their inquiry. A number of objections have been raised to evidentialism involving cases of irresponsible inquiry and the relevance of unpossessed evidence. In this paper, I argue that while these objections miss their mark, they do help motivate a distinct, and richer, concept of epistemic justification. This different concept of justification, what I call ‘robust justification’, supplements the evidentialist account of epistemic justification with an assessment of the subject’s evidence with respect to their inquiry. According to this proposal, to be robustly justified in believing a proposition at a time, the subject’s evidence must support that proposition at that time and that evidence must be the result of the subject’s responsible inquiry. While robust justification is not necessary for knowledge, I argue that it is an independently valuable epistemic state.

1. Evidentialism

Evidentialism is a theory of epistemic justification. Evidentialists endorse the following principle:

ES The epistemic justification of anyone’s doxastic attitude toward any proposition at any time strongly supervenes on the evidence that person has at that time. (Conee & Feldman 2004a, 101)

So understood, evidentialism is a supervenience thesis.[[1]](#footnote-1) No two subjects who are alike evidentially differ in terms of their epistemic justification. Evidentially alike subjects are also justificationally alike subjects. For the evidentialist, epistemic justification is entirely a matter of one’s evidence and what that evidence supports. In particular, justification is a matter of fitting the evidence. Thus, evidentialists also endorse the following:

EJ 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. (Conee & Feldman 2004b, 83)

What EJ makes clear is that epistemic justification is a property of fit – fit between one’s evidence (at a time) and a doxastic attitude toward a proposition. For the evidentialist, epistemic justification just is this property of evidential fittingness.

Evidentialism is really a family of views, and so evidentialists can disagree as to what counts as evidence (eg. experiences, propositions), what the relevant doxastic attitudes are (eg. all-out beliefs or more fine-grained credences), as well as what precisely it takes for a doxastic attitude to *fit* a body of evidence.[[2]](#footnote-2) These familial differences needn’t concern us here, however, since for our purposes it is sufficient to note that for the evidentialist, epistemic justification is simply a matter of fit. It is from this feature of evidentialism that a problem arises.

1. Evidentialism and Irresponsibility

Before examining our focal problem, it is worth briefly looking at some objections to evidentialism that are distinct from our concern, but are nevertheless in the neighborhood. What these objections have in common is that they all involve evidence that the subject does not possess but in some sense *should* possess.[[3]](#footnote-3) Consider the following case.

**Emma’s Email**

While responding to some emails, I receive an email from my former colleague Emma with the subject line, “Devastating Objection to your Current Research Project”. I know that Emma has been recently working on a similar research project and that she is a good and fair-minded evaluator of the evidence. However, I like my current view (which resulted from my current research project), and I rather like being justified in believing it (let’s suppose I am at least up until the point of receiving the email).[[4]](#footnote-4) So, in a maneuver to maintain the status quo, I simply delete the email without reading it (and perhaps even block all future emails from Emma).[[5]](#footnote-5)

According to this objection, evidentialism wrongly gives the verdict that despite my irresponsible behavior I remain justified in believing my view. If epistemic justification is simply a matter of evidential fit, and I work diligently to avoid evidence that would change which doxastic attitude my current total body of evidence fits, it seems as though I can remain justified in believing my view in the above scenario. However, that would be the wrong result and would license a kind of ostrich epistemology.[[6]](#footnote-6) Ostrich epistemology occurs when you get some favorable evidence, and proceed to bury your head in the sand, avoiding any conflicting information, in order to remain justified in maintaining the target belief. Such an agent, and such beliefs, are hardly deserving of positive epistemic assessment.

However, evidentialism is not without a response here. While I delete Emma’s email and never get to hear what her actual objection to my view is, it does not follow that I fail to receive any evidence against my view. In simply seeing the email subject line, and knowing it is coming from Emma (a person of high intellectual character), I get higher-order evidence that there is powerful evidence against my view. Higher-order evidence is evidence about what evidence there is, its quality or quantity. In learning that Emma believes that she has strong evidence against my view, I come to have higher-order evidence that there is strong evidence against my view. I know Emma to be a reliable judge of such matters, and that the way that she sees things is that the balance of evidence is against my view. Once this higher-order evidence is added to my total body of evidence (by way of seeing the email’s subject line), my new total body of evidence no longer supports believing my view.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is in line with Feldman’s famous slogan, “evidence of evidence is evidence.”[[8]](#footnote-8) So, evidentialism does not allow my epistemic irresponsibility here to protect the epistemic status of my view for me, or at least it need not.

A parallel response applies to the ‘ostrich epistemology’ concern more generally. If I am ‘burying my head’ to avoid getting evidence against my view, evidence that I know is out there, even if not possessed by me, it does not follow that this unpossessed evidence has no bearing on what I am justified in believing. Even if I don’t have the particular items of first-order evidence, my evidence of their existence is already part of my evidence and this higher-order evidence will have effects on what I am justified in believing even absent my access to the first-order evidence itself. The effect of this unpossessed evidence is indirect, but there is nevertheless an effect. So, evidentialism is not committed to the view that agents can manipulate their evidence in ways to remain justified in believing their most cherished beliefs. If an agent is intentionally avoiding evidence, then they have higher-order evidence that such evidence is out there to be avoided.[[9]](#footnote-9) Even in the absence of the relevant first-order evidence, the subject’s awareness of the existence of such evidence is higher-order evidence that they do possess, and thus it will have an effect on what they are justified in believing. So, the evidentialist has a response to cases where an agent *intentionally* manipulates their evidence in an effort to be justified in their beliefs.

Another potential problem for evidentialism concerns cases where the subject *unintentionally* has an impoverished body of evidence. Such cases might seem just as problematic as cases where the subject intentionally manipulates their evidence, and the same evidentialist response is not available here. If the subject is unaware that their evidence is seriously impoverished, they will lack the relevant higher-order evidence to rescue the desired verdict. An objection to evidentialism along these lines comes from Jason Baehr (2011)[[10]](#footnote-10).

**Oblivious George**

George epitomizes the vices of intellectual laziness, apathy, and obliviousness. He lacks any natural curiosity and is almost entirely tuned out to the news of the day. Unsurprisingly, George has many beliefs he should not and fails to believe many things he should. In the former category is George’s belief that exposure to secondhand smoke poses no significant health risks. Given his extremely narrow and practical focus, George is oblivious to all of the well-publicized research indicating the hazards of secondhand smoke. In fact, George actually has positive evidence in support of his belief. He recalls having learned from a reliable source some years ago that a considerable amount of research had been conducted concerning the effects of exposure to secondhand smoke and that this research had failed to establish any correlation between such exposure and any serious health problems. And as far as George knows, the research on this topic has not changed. Nor, we may suppose, does he have any reason to think that it might have changed. (90)

In this case, George’s total body of evidence supports the proposition that secondhand smoke poses no significant health risks, even though there is a very real sense in which George should know better. George’s total body of evidence is drastically deficient on the matter, but importantly George has no idea that this is the case. In fact, his evidence even supports the proposition that his evidence on the matter is entirely adequate. So, unlike our earlier case, George lacks any higher-order evidence that can take the place of his missing first-order evidence. Since George is oblivious to the existence of powerful evidence against his belief, he has no evidence of its existence. In fact, George arguably even has evidence *against* its existence. For instance, he might have evidence that if the data had changed, then he would have heard about it. If George’s total evidence supports the view that research on the topic has not changed, then he even has higher-order evidence that his evidence on the matter remains representative of the evidence that there is on this issue. Such evidence would be misleading, but misleading evidence is still evidence.

Baehr takes the case of George to raise a counterexample to evidentialism since while George’s total body of evidence supports believing that secondhand smoke poses no significant health risks, George is not epistemically justified in believing this due to his epistemic irresponsibility in inquiry. Along these same lines, Cloos (2015) argues that George is culpably ignorant due to his epistemically blameworthy inquiry, and that this ignorance prevents him from being epistemically justified in his belief. Since George would have acquired defeating evidence had he been a responsible inquirer, Cloos too declares his target belief unjustified.

While it is clear that something has gone wrong here, and that George has been epistemically irresponsible, the case of George is not a counterexample to evidentialism. To see this, let’s first consider the alternative epistemic assessments to make of George and his doxastic attitudes. If *belief* is not the attitude that George is justified in adopting toward the proposition that secondhand smoke poses no significant health risks, what is? Should he disbelieve this claim?[[11]](#footnote-11) Is disbelief the doxastic attitude he is epistemically justified in adopting toward this claim? While we are all familiar with evidence that strongly supports that this claim is false, George is entirely ignorant of this information. All George can do is work with the evidence that he has, and the evidence that he has strongly supports believing the proposition. Should he be suspending judgment? Is suspension of judgment the epistemically justified attitude for George to adopt toward this claim? This can’t be correct either, since all the information George has on the matter supports believing this proposition. From George’s perspective, suspension of judgment cannot seem, or be, rational.

So, if we take belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment to be George’s doxastic options here, belief is the one for George to go with. While there may be plenty to criticize George for, believing in accordance with his evidence and having a justified belief are not among them. George’s epistemic situation is not too dissimilar to those who pre-dated Copernicus and believed that the Earth was the center of the solar system. While they were mistaken, and there was plenty of evidence to the contrary that was ‘out there’ in some sense, this evidence to the contrary was entirely outside of their ken. Given that they had no idea that such evidence existed, it would be a mistake to think that such evidence should factor in to what they were justified in believing. The same holds for George. Given that he is entirely unaware of the powerful evidence that second-hand smoke is harmful to your health, he remains justified in believing that it isn’t.

Further, there is a problem with the epistemic assessment of George given by both Baehr and Cloos. Baehr and Cloos each maintain that it is George’s *epistemic irresponsibility* that prevents him from having an epistemically justified belief. However, if epistemic irresponsibility is sufficient to undermine epistemic justification, then it would be impossible for there to be epistemically lazy or irresponsible knowers (since epistemic justification is a necessary condition for knowledge). But there are epistemically lazy or irresponsible knowers. 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.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Sally has been an irresponsible inquirer regarding the final score in the Bears game. In fact, Sally has even been an actively bad inquirer. Sally has devoted significant effort to avoid any evidence on the matter. Nevertheless, Sally now knows the final score on the basis of Suzy’s testimony.[[13]](#footnote-13) So, Sally knows the outcome despite doing all she can to avoid having a true belief on the matter! Since epistemic justification is a necessary condition for knowledge, this case shows that epistemic justification does not require responsible inquiry on the part of the subject. Given that epistemic justification does not require responsible inquiry, the analysis of Oblivious George given by both Baehr and Cloos cannot be correct. If George is not justified in his belief, it would need to be for some alternative reason.

1. A Problem

While the above irresponsibility objections to evidentialism fail, there is a problem that nevertheless lurks in the neighborhood. To see the problem that arises for evidentialism, let us begin by considering an analogy. The analogy that I want us to consider regards the evaluation of arguments, and deductive arguments in particular. There are two general ways in which an argument can go wrong: i) its conclusion can fail to follow its premises, and ii) it can have bad premises. One way for an argument to avoid the first problem is for it to be valid.

V An argument is *valid* just in case its form is such that it cannot have all true premises and a false conclusion.

Valid arguments have conclusions that follow their premises (and follow them in a rather strong way). In this way, validity is entirely a property of fit. Valid arguments have conclusions that fit their premises.[[14]](#footnote-14)

However, as we are well aware, an argument being valid is not all that much of an achievement. Plenty of horrific arguments are valid. To give but one example, consider the following:

1. If the moon is made of green cheese, then triangles don’t have corners.
2. The moon is made of green cheese.
3. So, triangles don’t have corners.

While no one would be convinced to believe (3) on the basis of the above argument, it is a perfectly valid argument. The problem is not that the conclusion does not fit the premises. Indeed, given the truth of those premises, the conclusion must be true.

The problem with the above argument, of course, is that it has ridiculous premises (one of which is false). The argument fails to avoid our second type of problem that arguments can encounter. To pick out this problem we appeal to the concept of a sound argument.

S An argument is *sound* just in case it is valid, and it has all true premises.

Sound arguments avoid both ways that an argument can go wrong. The problem with the argument given above is that while it is valid, it is not sound. For an argument to be sound it takes more than a relation of fit between the premises and the conclusion; the premises themselves (a relata of the fit relation) require some positive evaluation. What is being fit, must itself have some positive status. To be sound, it matters what kind of premises the conclusion of the argument is fitting.

The analogy to evidentialism should be quite clear. Evidentialist justification is solely a matter of fit – fit between one’s evidence and a doxastic attitude toward a proposition. In this way, evidentialist justification is like validity, which is also simply a matter of fit. While validity and evidentialist justification each offer some positive evaluation of the intended target, each leaves something more to be desired. Like a conclusion can fit bad premises, a doxastic attitude (toward a proposition) could fit a bad, or impoverished, body of evidence. A richer, and more robust, epistemic evaluation would go beyond the mere relation of fit to also include an evaluation of the individual’s body of evidence as well – an evaluation of what is that the doxastic attitude is fitting.

To further motivate this point, consider the following example:

**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.

Against this backdrop, let me stipulate a few other things. Let’s suppose that Kat has correctly responded to her evidence on the matter. So, let’s suppose that her belief is epistemically justified by evidentialist standards. In addition, let’s suppose that Pat has also correctly responded to her evidence on the matter – that she too is epistemically justified in her belief on the matter. While Pat and Kat have very different bodies of evidence on the matter, each can support believing the proposition that the tax plan will add to the deficit. Further, we can even suppose that each body of evidence supports believing the relevant proposition *to the same degree* – that these distinct bodies of evidence offer the same level of support to the proposition that the tax plan will add to the deficit. While Kat’s body of evidence on the matter is much more extensive, we can suppose that it has some pieces of evidence that point in each direction, some defeaters, some defeater-defeaters, and so forth. On the other hand, Pat’s body of evidence on the matter is pretty sparse. She may have some initial intuitions about various things, but on this matter her evidence is principally Kat’s testimony (at least coupled with what she knows about Kat). That said, we can suppose that the evidential scales in each case both support believing the target proposition, and both support the attitude of belief to the same degree.

Given all of this, evidentialism has it that Kat and Pat are equally justified in their respective beliefs that the tax plan will add to the deficit. End of the evidentialist assessment. While there may be a sense in which Kat and Pat are epistemically on a par, such an epistemic verdict appears to be importantly incomplete. While both of our subjects have responded correctly to their respective bodies of evidence, the evidentialist’s evaluation ignores quality and quantity of the total body of evidence that each subject is responding to as well as the lengths to which each subject went to acquire their evidence. Put more bluntly, the evidentialist assessment fails to assess how good or bad a subject’s body of evidence is.[[15]](#footnote-15)

A second example may help.

**Ways of Withholding**

Will and Wilma both suspend judgment about the proposition that God exists, and both are justified in adopting this doxastic attitude toward this proposition. However, this is where the similarities between the two end. Will suspends judgment because he has never thought about the matter. He has no evidence at all about whether God exists and so his total evidence does not support believing or disbelieving that God exists. The only doxastic attitude that it would be justified for him to adopt toward this proposition is suspension of judgment. Wilma, on the other had, has thought extensively about the matter. She has studied the strongest arguments and considerations both for and against God’s existence. Overwhelmed by the extensive state of disagreement she suspends judgment.

Here too we can suppose that each subject has responded correctly to their evidence; that each state of withholding is supported by the respective bodies of evidence (and equally so). The evidentialist assessment has it that Wil and Wilma are equally justified in their suspending judgment about whether God exists. End of assessment. Here too, such an assessment seems woefully incomplete. Even if both Wil and Wilma have done equally well with respect to responding to the evidence they have, if the epistemic assessments end there, we are left without an assessment of how well each has done with respect to acquiring the evidence they have to work with.

What these cases show is that evidentialism is inadequate in giving some epistemic assessments. This is not to say that evidentialism is false, just that it is incomplete – other important epistemic assessments remain unaccounted for by evidentialism. We should have a way to distinguish the epistemic state of Pat from that of Kat, and the epistemic state of Wil from that of Wilma. Evidentialism does not give us the tools to make these assessments.

The above is not an objection to evidentialism since it does not dispute the verdicts given by evidentialism. These cases do not point to examples where believing p fits the subject’s evidence, yet they are not epistemically justified in believing p. Nor are they cases where a subject is epistemically justified in believing p without belief toward p fitting their evidence. The problem here is merely that the verdicts of evidentialism are incomplete – that we shouldn’t stop our epistemic assessment[[16]](#footnote-16) with the evidentialist verdicts. There are important epistemic assessments that evidentialism does not have the resources to make.

1. The Solution: Robust Justification

To solve this problem we need to supplement the evidential fit property, which is the focus of evidentialism, with an evaluation of the body of evidence the subject possesses. Let’s call this richer conception of epistemic justification ‘robust justification’.

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’s evidence is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Returning to our analogy with arguments, the goodness of a sound argument requires supplementing the fit property of validity with a positive evaluation of the premises – they must be true. So, what kind of assessment of the subject’s evidence will deliver the desired verdicts? How should we fill in the blank in our account? What makes a subject’s body of evidence good, or right, or otherwise appropriate?

One might be tempted to lean even more heavily on the analogy with argument evaluation and claim that, just as the premises of a sound argument must be true, the subject’s evidence must be true for them to be robustly justified in what they believe. While there are interesting debates about the factivity of evidence, such a proposal does not help here. We can suppose that all evidence is propositional and that to be robustly justified a subject’s evidence must all be true, but this will not help us distinguish Pat and Kat (or Will and Wilma). To see this, we can suppose that both Pat and Kat only have true propositions as their evidence. Nevertheless, there appears to be an important epistemic difference between the two. The truth of their evidence does not get at the relevant difference.

A natural way to fill in the blank is to appeal to responsible inquiry. Responsible inquiry seems to be what differentiates Pat from Kat, and Will from Wilma. This would also provide a place for responsible inquiry in epistemic justification like others have sought to do in their attacks on evidentialism. This leads us to the following:

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.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This understanding of robust justification gets our cases correct. It provides an explanation of what differentiates the epistemic status of Kat’s belief from that of Pat’s, and Wilma’s withholding from Will’s. Kat and Wilma have been responsible inquirers, while Pat and Will have not.[[18]](#footnote-18) While all four have correctly responded to the evidence they possess, only Kat and Wilma have bodies of evidence that are the result of responsible inquiry. This understanding of robust justification also harnesses the intuitions that motivated the irresponsibility objections to evidentialism considered above. While those objections failed to show that evidentialism gives an incorrect account of epistemic justification (the kind of justification requisite for knowledge), the motivating force behind them can be used to help motivate a different conception of justification that captures this responsibilist element, although in a different way.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Before moving on, it is worth noting two important differences between robust justification and soundness – the players in our analogy. First, while soundness supplemented a (normative) fit property (validity) with a metaphysical property (truth), robust justification supplements a (normative) fit property (EJ) with a further normative property (responsible inquiry).[[20]](#footnote-20) So, robust justification is doubly normative. Second, while soundness is an all-or-nothing property, robust justification comes in degrees. Both conditions (i) and (ii) of robust justification can be met to varying degrees. A body of evidence can support a doxastic attitude to differing degrees, and a responsibly gathered bodies of evidence can differ in the degrees of responsibility exercised in their attainment. Since both elements of robust justification come in degrees, it is best to think of robust justification as a degreed notion. Neither of these notable disanalogies, however, diminish the usefulness of the analogy.[[21]](#footnote-21)

1. The Value of Robust Justification

Having made the case for robust justification and a responsibilist understanding of it, it is worth pausing to consider the value of robust justification. Why care about robust justification?

As we have seen, robust justification is not a necessary condition for knowledge. The case of Sally’s Spoiler shows that even irresponsible inquiry can result in knowledge. A subject can come to know p despite their best efforts to avoid having a true belief about p. So, the value of robust justification cannot come by way of its connection to knowledge.

The value of robust justification can best be seen by looking at those who seem to have conflated it with the kind of epistemic justification that is a necessary condition of knowledge, like in the above objections that reside in the neighborhood. For instance, in giving his necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge, A.J. Ayer proposed the following:

S know p just in case: i) p is true,

ii) S is sure of p,

iii) S has the right to be sure that p.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The concept of having ‘the right to be sure’ or having ‘the right to believe’ is captured nicely by the concept of robust justification. If one is believing in line with their evidence and they have been responsible in their inquiry and collection of evidence, then they have the right to that resulting belief. They have the best possible doxastic response to the evidence it can reasonably be expected for them to have. This is an epistemically valuable state to be in, even though Ayer was incorrect in believing that it was a requirement for knowledge.

W.K. Clifford, though guilty of confusing evidentialist justification and robust justification, does nicely highlight the value and importance of robust justification. Along the same lines as Ayer, Clifford says of the negligent ship owner in his famous example, “he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The idea here seems to be that even if the shipowner is correctly responding to the evidence that he has, this is insufficient since he should have had more (and better) evidence on the matter. More forcefully, when evaluating the individual who has no time for detailed inquiry, Clifford claims that such an individual also has no time for belief! Here too the focus is on robust justification for a belief – a belief being supported by your total evidence when that total evidence is the result of responsible inquiry. It is such justification that puts you in a stronger epistemic standing toward your belief than mere evidential support, and this standing does not hinge upon your belief being true (unlike knowledge).

Miracchi (forthcoming), puts the point this way,

There may be a positive normative property possessed by people who believe in accordance with their evidence no matter how that evidence

was arrived at, but such a property does not deserve a primary place in our epistemological theorizing. This is because we in fact do have substantial control over what evidence we have, what reasoning capabilities we have, whether we jump to conclusions, and so on. This control is often diachronic, and so does not entail any kind of problematic voluntarism about belief. Because we do, over time, have control over the quality of our bodies of evidence, such quality can properly figure into how we hold people accountable for their epistemic attitudes.

While she too draws the wrong conclusion from such an insight (rejecting the evidentialist notion of epistemic justification), she does show why robust justification is valuable.

Finally, returning to our analogy with arguments can also help solidify the value of robust justification. Sound arguments are much more valuable than merely valid arguments. Sound arguments not only have conclusions that fit their premises, but what they fit is in fact true. Fitting with the truth is much more valuable than mere fit. Similarly, robust justification is more valuable than mere evidential fit. Robustly justified beliefs do not merely fit the subject’s evidence, but the evidence that they fit is the result of responsible inquiry. Fitting bodies of evidence that are the result of responsible inquiry is much more valuable than simply fitting some body of evidence or other. In extending the epistemic evaluation beyond evidential fit, robust justification provides a more valuable epistemic assessment, even if it is not a necessary condition for knowledge.

1. Conclusion

In this paper we have seen the need for an epistemic evaluation beyond the notion of epistemic justification supplied by evidentialism. While we have seen reason to resist several extant objections to evidentialism that all center or irresponsible inquiry, we have also seen that a richer conception of epistemic justification – robust justification – supplements the property of evidential fit (provided by evidentialist justification) with the property of one’s evidence being the result of responsible inquiry. Appealing to robust justification allows us to make important epistemic distinctions that evidentialist justification does not, and we have also seen that robust justification is epistemically valuable in ways that are independent of knowledge.[[24]](#endnote-1)

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1. However, see Beddor (2015) for an argument that understanding evidentialism as a thesis about grounding may be more apt. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For one such account, see McCain (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Further discussions of unpossessed evidence and its significance can be found in Ballantyne (2015), Benton (2016), DeRose (2000), Goldberg (2017), Kornblith (1983), and Lackey (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Somewhat ironically, this supposition is quite significant, at least if one of my research projects is correct. See Matheson (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A similar kind of case, one where the subject intentionally ignores evidence, is given by Kornblith (1983, p. 36). Kornblith describes a case of an ego-driven young physicist who “pays no attention” to a senior colleague’s criticisms of his view (not even hearing what the colleague says), and so fails to appreciate the degree of support his own theory enjoys (relative to evidence already in possession by the scientific community). Here, according to Kornblith, the intuitive verdict is that he is “culpably ignorant”. (Kornblith 1983, p. 36) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I first heard the term ‘ostrich epistemology’ from Alvin Goldman when he was raising a similar challenge to evidentialism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Matheson (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Feldman (2007) and (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Acknowledging such an impact of higher-order evidence does not entail taking a particular stand in the epistemology of disagreement (conciliationist vs. steadfast views). Parties in both camps can agree that the beliefs of others are some higher-order evidence. What will matter for which view of disagreement one opts for is how they think those pieces of higher-order evidence interact with your own first-order evidence, considerations of self-trust, and so forth. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A similar objection is put forward in Miracchi (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Here the ‘ought’ language is picking out propositional justification. There are parallel debates concerning evidentialism and doxastic justification as well. See DeRose (2000) for a statement of the issue and Stapleford (2014) for a helpful response. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Such a case appears in McCain (2014), p.141 as *Football Jon*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Despite her bad moral character, Suzy is a very reliable testifier, and Sally knows this. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. One might worry that the talk of ‘fit’ is stretched here. While the conclusions of valid arguments follow from their premises, it might be strained to think of them as *fitting* their premises. While I don’t share this concern, we needn’t be troubled by it here. What is important to the analogy is that validity is entirely a formal/structural property involving a relation. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Does this imply that testimonial evidence is epistemically inferior to first-hand evidence? I don’t think so. Non-testimonial evidence does not entail responsibly gathered evidence, and testimonial evidence does not entail irresponsibly (or even less responsibly) gathered evidence. For instance, we can get at our same difference even while restricting the relevant evidence to testimonial evidence alone. Consider two detectives. One interviews all the eye-witnesses and forensic experts. The other just hears the conclusion of the first. While both may have beliefs justified to their evidence (and to the same degree), and bodies of evidence comprised entirely of testimonial evidence, there remains an important epistemic distinction between the two detectives. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It is worth noting that not everyone will consider this additional assessment epistemic. Stapleford (2012, 2015) agrees that justification is a matter of evidential fit, but he also claims that a certain degree of reflection on the evidence one possesses is required—on purely epistemic grounds. Dougherty (2014) argues that such assessments are solely within the domain of ethics. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Compare with Cloos’ (2015) account of responsibilist evidentialism. The key difference here is that Cloos is after an account of the justification required for knowledge, and as we have seen above, robust justification is a different matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. One might resist the claim that Pat has been an irresponsible inquirer. After all, Pat has gathered testimony from someone known to be a reliable source. Similarly, it might be thought that Will is no inquirer at all, and so not an irresponsible inquirer. These details needn’t get in the way of our point, however, since it is clear that Pat and Kat (and Will and Wilma) differ with respect to their responsibility in inquiry. Kat has been much more responsible than Pat (and Wilma has been much more responsible than Will). This is a difference that our epistemic concepts should capture. Thanks to Kevin McCain for pressing this worry. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. While appealing to responsible inquiry distinguishes our cases, it is not the only candidate capable of doing so. Another candidate appeals to the quantity and quality of the subject’s evidence – the resilience of the subject’s justification – regardless of whether it was the result of responsible inquiry. While responsible inquiry is often coupled with more and better evidence, it needn’t be. So, to evaluate our candidates we need to consider cases where the two come apart – cases where one has a vast body of evidence without responsible inquiry or cases where despite responsible inquiry one’s evidence is quite sparse. Suppose that Tom is looking into the after-effects of near-death experiences. Tom looks into the issue diligently for years, but the evidence is sparse and what’s there is not very strong. Nevertheless, the evidence Tom collects supports that survivors of a near death experience have increased compassion for others. Tom’s evidence is the result of responsible inquiry, but Tom’s evidence is not resilient. New information could easily shift what his evidence supports. Tom is robustly justified in his belief—he’s done well in inquiry and he’s following the evidence he has. This gives us reason to prefer the responsibilist account of robust justification. For a discussion of the relevance of resilience, see McCain and Poston (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Thanks to Scott Stapleford for pointing this out. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Since each condition for robust justification comes in degrees, interesting questions emerge regarding how the degrees to which each condition are met combine to give a degree to which one is robustly justified. Such details, like the details regarding responsible inquiry, are left to fuller treatments of robust justification. This project simply aims to get the concept on the map. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ayer (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Clifford (1999) p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. I am very grateful for feedback from Kevin McCain and Scott Stapleford, as well as audiences at the Southeastern Epistemology Conference and the Alabama Philosophical Society. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)