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**Why Explanationists Shouldn’t Make Evidential Fit Dispositional**

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By Andrew Moon and Pamela Robinson

**1. Introduction**

Kevin McCain’s *Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification* is the most thorough defense of evidentialism to date. In this work, McCain proposes insightful new theses to fill in under-developed parts of evidentialism. One of these new theses is an explanationist account of evidential fit that appeals to dispositional properties. We argue that this explanationist account faces counterexamples, and that, more generally, explanationists should not understand evidential fit in terms of dispositional properties.

**2. Explanationist Accounts of Evidential Fit**

Suppose you have the sort of visual experience one typically has when seeing a red object. Plausibly, this visual experience evidentially supports your believing that *something is red*. But what makes this proposition *fit* that evidence?

McCain provides the following theory:

**Explanationist Fit (EF)**: *p* fits S's evidence, *e*, at *t* IFF either *p* is part of the best explanation available to S at *t* for why S has *e* or *p* is available to S as a logical consequence of the best explanation available to S at *t* for why S has *e*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The first disjunct of the *analysans* explains why the visual experience supports believing that something is red. The proposition <something is red> is ‘part of the best explanation available to you’ for why you have that experience. The second disjunct explains why the visual experience supports believing any logical consequence of the best explanation available, such as <something is there>.

Crucial to understanding EF is ‘*p* is part of the best explanation available to S for why S has *e*’. According to McCain,

**Available as part of the best explanation**: S has *p* available as part of the best explanation for why S has *e* (at *t*) IFF: (at *t*) S has the concepts required to understand *p* and S is disposed to have a seeming that *p* is part of the best answer to the question "why does S have *e*?" on the basis of reflection alone.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Note that according to this definition, ‘S has *p* available as part of the best explanation for why S has *e*’ does not entail that *p* is part of the best, or is even part of any, explanation for why S has *e*. This is because S’s being disposed to have a seeming that *p* is part of the best answer to some question does not entail that *p* really is part of the best, or is part of any, explanation of that question.[[3]](#footnote-3)

So, a more transparent way of writing EF references dispositions rather than explanations, for the dispositions are what matter:

**Explanationist Fit (EF)**: *p* fits S's evidence, *e*, at *t* IFF S has the concepts required to understand *p* and, either: (i) S is disposed to have a seeming that *p* is part of the best answer to the question "why does S have *e*?" on the basis of reflection alone, or (ii) S is disposed to have a seeming that *BA* is the best answer to the question "why does S have *e*?" on the basis of reflection alone, and *p* is a logical consequence of *BA*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Suppose you have the concepts required to understand the proposition <something is red>. Presumably, if you were to reflect on the question “Why do I have this visual experience?”, it would seem to you that <something is red> is part of the best answer to that question. So, McCain’s theory correctly predicts that your belief that <something is red> fits your perceptual evidence.

It is easy to miss that EF is a highly subjectivist theory. In this context, roughly, a theory is subjectivist to the degree that evidential fit depends on the subject’s inclination to take *p* as part of the best explanation for why S has *e*. In the rest of this section, we will compare EF to three related explanationist theories of evidential fit, each increasing in its degree of subjectivity.

Let ‘*BE*’ stand for ‘the best explanation at *t* for why S has *e*.’ The least subjectivist version of explanationist fit is:

**Strong Objectivist EF**: *p* fits S's evidence, *e*, at *t* IFF either (i) *p* is part of *BE*, or (ii) *p* is a logical consequence of *BE*.

On this view, a proposition fits your evidence simply when it’s part of (or entailed by) the best explanation for why you have the evidence. Note that Strong Objectivist EF does not require that the explanation is available to you. How inclined you are to take *p* to be part of the best explanation for why you have *e* makes no difference to evidential fit.

The following is a more subjectivist view:

**Moderate Objectivist EF**: *p* fits S's evidence, *e*, at *t* IFF ***S has the concepts required to understand p*** and, either: (i) *p* is part of *BE* and ***S is disposed to have a seeming that p is part of the best answer to the question of why S has e (on the basis of reflection alone)***, or (ii) *p* is a logical consequence of *BE*and ***S is disposed to have a seeming that BE is the best answer to the question of why S has e (on the basis of reflection alone)***.

On this version of evidential fit, a proposition fits your evidence when it’s part of (or entailed by) the best explanation for why you have the evidence, *and* you’re disposed to take it to be part of this best explanation, where this just means that you’re disposed to have a seeming that it’s part of the best answer to the question of why you have that evidence. Moderate Objectivist EF is more subjectivist than Strong Objectivist EF since it requires that the explanation be available to you. On the other hand, Moderate Objectivist EF is less subjectivist than EF, which doesn’t actually require that *p* be part of the best explanation.

The next account is even more subjectivist and requires some set up. There is some set of explanations, {E1, ..., En}, such that, for every member of {E1, …, En}, Sis disposed, on the basis of reflection alone, to have a seeming that it is an answer to the question of why S has *e*. This is the set of explanations that are ‘available’ to S in McCain’s sense. Note that {E1, ..., En} might not include *all* the explanations for why S has *e*; there might be explanations that S is not disposed to consider.  Now let ‘*BE\**’ pick out the best of those explanations {E1, …, En}. The next account is:

**Moderate Subjectivist EF**: *p* fits S's evidence, *e*, at *t* IFF S has the concepts required to understand *p* and, either: (i) *p* is part of *BE*\* or (ii) *p* is a logical consequence of *BE*\*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This view is more subjectivist than both Strong Objectivist EF and Moderate Objectivist EF since it doesn’t require that *p* be part of the actual best explanation for why S has *e*.  However, it’s not as subjectivist as EF since it requires that *p* be part of (or a logical consequence of) the actual best of {E1, …, En}.  EF doesn’t require that *p* actually be part of an explanation, of the restricted set of explanations {E1, …, En}, or of any other interesting set; all that’s required is that S be disposed to have a seeming that *p* is part of the best answer to the question of why S has *e*.

By canvassing these different degrees of subjectivity, we can see just how strongly subjectivist EF is. A more appropriate label for EF might be ‘Strong Subjectivist EF,’ but we will stick with ‘EF.’ [[6]](#footnote-6)

**3. Problems with McCain’s Account of Evidential Fit**

In 3.1, we give counterexamples that exploit the fact that, according to EF, *p* isn’t actually required to be a part of the *best*, or even *an*, explanation of *e*. In 3.2, we give a counterexample that exploits the fact that, according to subjectivist explanationist accounts, the explanation (or apparent explanation) must be dispositionally available to S. In 3.3, we show how explanationist views that appeal to dispositional accounts of available explanations face a new evil demon problem.

*3.1 Weird Dispositions Counterexamples*

Paranoid: Unbeknownst to Bucky, a demon has tampered with him and has given him a certain complex disposition. Now, when he has the visual experience of his friend Steve smiling, he is disposed to have a seeming that <Steve wants to kill me> is part of the best answer to the question of why he has this visual experience. Bucky has no memory or past experience of Steve ever posing a threat. They are—or were—friendly acquaintances.

According to EF, <Steve wants to kill me> fits Bucky’s visual experience of Steve smiling. But intuitively, this is false. This visual experience might evidentially fit <Steve is smiling> or <Steve is happy>, but it does not fit <Steve wants to kill me>.

Consider another version of Paranoid, call it ‘Nonsensical’, in which the demon had instead caused Bucky to have the disposition to have a seeming that <grass is green> is part of the best answer to the question of why he has the visual experience of Steve smiling. EF has the counterintuitive result that <grass is green> fits Bucky’s evidence. These cases show that EF is too permissive. It allows anything that you’re disposed to *take* as part of the best explanation for why you have your evidence to count, even if it’s not a good explanation (as in Paranoid) or an explanation at all (as in Nonsensical).

*3.2 Impoverished Dispositions Counterexample*

McCain might be tempted to give up EF and retreat to Moderate Subjectivist EF or Moderate Objectivist EF, which require that p is part of an, or the best, explanation. However, the following case poses a problem even for these less subjectivist views.

Blue Sky: Suppose Carla lies resting in a field, closing her eyes and occasionally looking up at the sky. Nothing interesting is going on with the sky: it's clear and blue whenever Carla happens to open her eyes. At *t*, Carla opens her eyes and has the mental state of being appeared to blue-skyly. At *t* Carla is disposed to have the seeming that <I opened my eyes> is the best answer to the question of why she is appeared to blue-skyly. At *t*, Carla is *not* disposed to have any other seemings about other answers, or parts of answers, to the question of why she is appeared to blue-skyly.

According to EF, <Carla opened her eyes> fits her evidence, that is, her mental state of being appeared to blue-skyly. This seems correct. But it also seems that propositions like <Carla looked at the sky> or <the sky is blue> fit her evidence. And according to EF they do not: they are not part of (or entailed by) the best explanation *available to Carla*.

This is also a problem for both Moderate Objectivist EF and Moderate Subjectivist EF. Plausibly, <Carla opened her eyes> is part of the best explanation for why Carla has her visual experience. So, since this explanation is available to Carla, <Carla opened her eyes> fits her evidence according to Moderate Objectivist EF and Moderate Subjectivist EF. However, since this is the only explanation (or only part of an explanation) available to Carla, no other proposition fits Carla’s evidence according to Moderate Subjectivist EF or Moderate Objectivist EF.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Interestingly, Strong Objectivist EF seems to get the right result in all these cases. Plausibly, neither <Steve wants to kill me> nor <grass is green> are part of the best explanation for why Bucky has his evidence, so they do not fit his evidence according to Strong Objectivist EF. But <Steve is smiling> and <Steve is happy> are part of the best explanation for why Bucky has his evidence, so they fit it according to Strong Objectivist EF. Also, it’s plausible that <Carla opened her eyes>, <Carla looked at the sky>, and <the sky is blue> are all part of the best explanation for why Carla has her evidence, so they all fit her evidence according to Strong Objectivist EF.

*3.3 The New Evil Demon Problem*

The New Evil Demon Problem (NEDP) purports to show that certain properties are irrelevant to whether a belief is justified. For example, consider the view that a belief’s being reliably formed is relevant to whether it is justified. Now suppose that Smith’s belief seems justified and is formed by a reliable process. We can imagine a mental duplicate of Smith, Smith\*, whose belief is not formed by a reliable process due to the machinations of a demon. Intuitively, Smith and Smith\* are equally justified in their belief. It seems that any two individuals who are identical except for the mere difference of reliable belief production will be justificationally identical. This seems to show that reliable belief formation is not relevant to justification.[[8]](#footnote-8)

We argue that a version of the NEDP shows that the dispositions McCain appeals to are irrelevant to justification. Consider Paranoid. Imagine a Bucky\* who has the same memories, beliefs, and experiences as Bucky but who never had a demon tamper with him. He thereby does not have the paranoid disposition. When Bucky and Bucky\* have qualitatively identical visual experiences at *t* of Steve smiling, it follows from EF that Bucky has evidence that fits <Steve wants to kill me> while Bucky\* does not.[[9]](#footnote-9) Given evidentialism and EF, Bucky has more justification for believing <Steve wants to kill me> at *t* than Bucky\* does. But this is counterintuitive. It seems that the two Buckys are justificationally alike.

Now consider the dispositional requirements of Moderate Subjective EF and Moderate Objective EF. Suppose Bucky\*\* is just like Bucky\*, but a demon has *erased* his normal human disposition to have a seeming that <Steve is smiling> is part of the best explanation for why he has the visual experience of Steve smiling. On either of the two theories, it’s plausible that Bucky\* has evidence that fits <Steve is smiling>. However, Bucky\*\* does not because he lacks the relevant disposition. This is counterintuitive. It seems that they are justificationally alike.

These instances of the NEDP show that the dispositions McCain appeals to are irrelevant to justification, just as more standard versions of the NEDP show that reliable belief production is irrelevant. It seems that any two individuals who are identical except for the mere difference of dispositional availability of explanations will be justificationally identical. Strong Objectivist EF is not subject to this version of the NEDP since it does not appeal to dispositions.

We have argued that there are counterexamples to EF. One might think that EF merely requires tweaking. But Moderate Subjectivist EF and Moderate Objectivist EF also face counterexamples. Furthermore, our discussion of the NEDP reveals that the underlying problem is the appeal to dispositions. Strong Objectivist EF, which does not appeal to them, faces neither the counterexamples nor the NEDP. We conclude that explanationists should not analyze evidential fit in terms of the dispositional availability of explanations. [[10]](#footnote-10)

**Works Cited**

McCain, Kevin (2014). *Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification*. New York: Routledge.

Moon, Andrew (2012). Three Forms of Internalism and the New Evil Demon Problem. *Episteme*, 9: 345-60.

Poston, Ted (2014). *Reason and Explanation: A Defense of Explanatory Coherentism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

1. McCain (2014, 65). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. McCain (2014, 67). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Assuming that answers to questions are propositions, our thought is that not *every* proposition can be an explanation for anything. For example, <Jupiter is the largest planet in the Solar System> is not a *poor* explanation for the fact that 2+2=4; it’s not an explanation at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It’s possible that the account is actually:

*p* fits S's evidence, *e*, at *t* IFF S has the concepts required to understand *p* and, either: S is disposed to have a seeming that *p* is part of the best answer to the question "why does S have *e*?" on the basis of reflection alone, or **S is disposed to have a seeming that *p* is a logical consequence of the best answer to the question "why does S have *e*?" on the basis of reflection alone**.

The choice between the two versions depends on how McCain understands ‘*p* is available to S as a logical consequence of the best explanation available to S’. We think this version is less charitable and will assume the more objectivist understanding in what follows, but our argument does not depend on this choice. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Thanks to Liz Jackson, Dustin Crummett, and especially Philip Swenson for help formulating Moderate Subjectivist EF. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Note that a theory of evidential fit need not fall under McCain’s general framework in order to be explanationist. For example, on Ted Poston’s (2014, 87–95) explanationist view ‘Ex-J’, “S has justification for believing *p* if and only if *p* is a member of a sufficiently virtuous explanatory system, *E*, and *E* is more virtuous than any competing system *E*’” (87). According to Poston, evidence “resides in the virtues of the entirety of a system of beliefs” (93) and “[a] proposition is a member of an explanatory system by being a part of an explanans or part of an explanandum” (87). Now, it is not obvious how Ex-J can be converted into a theory of evidential fit, but note that nothing in his theory implies that *p* must explain why S has her evidence, or that S must be disposed to have a seeming that *p* is the best answer to why she has her evidence. So, Poston’s theory of evidential fit, when developed, may be very different from McCain’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. One option for the subjectivist about explanationist evidential fit would be to describe the evidence being explained in such a way that one would be more likely to be disposed have the 'right kind' of seeming about what best explains it. For example, a description of Carla’s evidence with an appropriate contrast—likethe mental state of being appeared to blue-skyly *rather than green-grassly*—could not be best explained by the proposition that Carla opened her eyes. This fix would not save EF from weird disposition cases, but it would make versions like Moderate Subjectivist EF and Moderate Objectivist EF more plausible. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a definition and further explanation of the NEDP, see Moon (2012, 348). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. To ensure that Bucky and Bucky\* are identical with respect to memories, beliefs, and experiences at *t*, suppose that Bucky’s disposition is never manifest because he never reflects: even though he has the paranoid disposition at *t*, it doesn’t seem to him at *t* that Steve wants to kill him or that <Steve wants to kill me> is the best answer to the question of why he has his visual experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Thanks to Kevin McCain, Ted Poston, and Philip Swenson for helpful discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)