

Experience, plausibility, and evidence

Ted Poston*

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Richard Feldman and Earl Conee's description of evidentialism is one of the most sensible claims of recent philosophy. Feldman and Conee articulate evidentialism thusly:

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 .¹

They explicitly remark on EJ's sensibility: "EJ is not intended to be surprising or innovative."² Yet, EJ is often joined with other theses about the structure of justification and the nature of experience that are dubious, viz., that the structure of evidence is foundational and that experience provides a basic source of evidence. In this paper, I argue that experience isn't a basic source of evidence. More specifically, I will argue that

(†) A token experience e justifies a belief that p only if it is independently plausible that e is a token of an experience type that reliably indicates whether p .

(†) spotlights the essential role of background plausibility considerations for experiential justification. Experience occurs in a context in which one often knows relevant facts about experience which support its reliability. I'll begin with a discussion of plausibility and then turn to the argument for (†).

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¹Feldman and Conee (1985, 15).

²Feldman and Conee (1985, 15)

1 Plausibility

What makes a claim plausible? The plausibility of a claim is its rational credence given some set of background information. Let's unpack this. A claim is plausible in relation to a body of evidence. A claim may be plausible given a certain set of background information but not plausible on a different set of background information. For example, given what we now know about cellular theory, it's plausible that researchers will discover a mechanism that delays aging. But, before we understood cellular theory, that was not plausible.³

Plausibility is distinct from probability. It's plausible that a fair coin lands heads, and it's plausible that the same coin lands tails. Moreover, a claim may be plausible even when its negation is more probable. It's plausible that 10 flips of a fair coin would result in either 4 or 5 heads. But the probability of 4 heads in 10 flips is 0.205 and the probability of 5 heads in 10 flips is 0.246. So the probability of either 4 or 5 heads is 0.451. Here again both a claim and its negation are plausible.

Plausibility, rather than being identified directly with a specific probability, e.g., $\frac{1}{2}$, is identified with a degree of rational surprise. To the extent that a claim is not rationally surprising given the evidence, it is plausible. The idea is that a claim is plausible if it is the case that were an oracle to tell you it's true, you would not be that surprised.

I capture this idea by the following:

(P) p is plausible given k if and only if $P(p | k)$ is not low.

While a claim may be plausible even if its negation is more probable, the plausibility of a claim diminishes as its probability goes down. Our interest in (\dagger) requires a notion of plausibility on which a claim is either plausible or not. I think the best we can do to capture this notion is what (P) specifies. The probability in question must not be low. But how low? I doubt there is a rule. It's plausible that a fair coin flipped 10 times lands heads 4 times, but the relevant probability is only 0.205. The best we can do is to consider specific cases.

It is well known that a piece of evidence may justify believing a claim given some background evidence, but also not justify believing a claim given other background evidence. Tom's testimony may justify you in believing p when you know that Tom is reliable on such matters, but not when you reasonably suspect that Tom is guessing.

Plausibility is a feature of the background evidence that would allow some new piece of evidence to raise the credence of the target claim high enough to justify belief.

³E.g., Telomeres are protective caps at the ends of chromosomes that shorten with age. Activating telomerase, an enzyme that can rebuild these caps, may slow down cellular aging.

Consider the following case. As of 2024, it is estimated that there are 10 to 15 yellow cardinals in the eastern US. A brief glance of a yellow bird does not do much to raise the credence that it is a yellow cardinal. The ratio of American goldfinches to yellow cardinals in the eastern US is approximately a million to one. On the view to be argued for, a visual experience of a yellow bird justifies the belief that bird is a yellow cardinal only if the background information makes it plausible that there is a yellow cardinal in the vicinity. In this case the background information makes it exceedingly unlikely that the observed yellow bird is a cardinal, and hence, the visual experience of a yellow bird does little to boost the probability that the bird is a cardinal. What is required for such an experience to make it reasonable to believe that the yellow bird is a cardinal is that the relevant background information sufficiently narrows down the relevant cases so that it is plausible that the yellow bird is a cardinal. How this works in a particular case depends on the details; identification of rare species depends on coordinating a number of relevant factors.

2 Experience & Independent Plausibility

Let's turn to the argument for (†). I support this claim by examining three cases of experiential justification and the attempts to evade any such requirement of independent plausibility.

2.1 Expert and Novice

Let's begin with a slightly modified case by Richard Feldman.⁴

Two people, Expert and Novice, are standing in a garden looking at a hornbeam tree. They have a clear and unobstructed view of the tree. The visual appearance present to each of the two people in the garden is exactly the same. Expert knows a lot about trees and can immediately identify most trees, including this one. Novice knows a little about trees but is unfamiliar with hornbeams.⁵

Expert and Novice have the same visual appearance. Yet what they are justified in believing differs. Expert is justified in believing that there is a hornbeam tree in the garden, but Novice is not justified in believing that. What accounts for the difference? The difference is explained by a contrast in background knowledge.

⁴The original case involves a third character which isn't relevant for my purposes.

⁵Feldman (2003, 147).

Expert knows enough about hornbeam trees to identify them by vision; Novice does not. Expert's background knowledge makes it independently plausible that when it visually appears to him thus, there's a hornbeam tree present. But Novice does not have such knowledge.

Michael Bergmann (2006) responds to a similar case involving an expert bird-watcher. Bergmann is concerned to resist the idea that experience requires, in general, independent justification to justify a belief. In the case of perception based on expertise, it does appear that some independent reason is required that justifies Expert in believing that there is a hornbeam tree. Bergmann responds by distinguishing *learned* from *unlearned* doxastic responses. He explains,

The distinction isn't easy to draw but it is something like this. Learned doxastic responses, such as an experienced birdwatcher's immediate bird identifications after a quick look (or listen), are ones a person comes to have only after first finding out independently (i.e. without relying in any essential way on other instances of that same type of doxastic response) that there is a correlation between the truth of such beliefs and the experiences to which they eventually become immediate responses. By contrast, an unlearned doxastic response to experience is a hardwired or automatic response that occurs (perhaps only after a certain level of cognitive development) without the subject first independently finding out that there is a correlation between the truth of the belief in question and the experience to which it is a response.⁶

Bergmann accepts that in Expert and Novice the difference in justification lies in the fact that there is a difference in background knowledge. What Expert knows independently of the particular experience of a hornbeam tree makes it plausible that his experience is of a hornbeam. Bergmann resists this move in general. On his view, some unlearned doxastic responses are fitting responses to experience even though there is no independent background information that supports the relevant claim. Whether Bergmann's fallback position is plausible depends on a several other factors that we will be in a position to evaluate later on in connection with the discussion of Jack Lyons's views.

2.2 Norman

The next case is one Laurence Bonjour used to argue against externalist views of knowledge and justification. On such views, a person can know a claim in virtue

⁶Bergmann (2006, 117)

of standing in appropriate external relations to the relevant fact. For example, a reliabilist conception of knowledge claims that if a belief is reliably produced then that claim, if true, is known.⁷ Bonjour presents the following counterexample.

Norman, under certain conditions that usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power, or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against his belief. In fact, the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power, under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.⁸

BonJour's Norman case highlights the significance of possessing evidence that gives one a perspective on the reliability of one's experience. In this case, it is not plausible that Norman's clairvoyant experience is reliable. He has no relevant evidence that supports the actuality of such a cognitive power, and it would be unusual for such a power to exist. Moreover, Norman's seeming that the President is in New York doesn't fit in with anything else that makes it plausible that Norman would be able to identify the President's location by coming to believe something about his whereabouts. Consequently, Norman isn't justified in believing the President is in New York.⁹

Many contemporary views in epistemology hold that experience provides a prima facie reason for believing the content of experience. These views do not require that experience is supported by positive background information that makes it independently plausible that experience is reliable.¹⁰ On such views, if a person acquires evidence that experience is unreliable then this undermines the justification experience provides. In the Norman case, we see the difference between my view and these defeasible foundationalist views. Without any relevant background knowledge about the plausibility of clairvoyance, Norman does not have any reason for thinking that the seeming *The President is in New York* is accurate. We will see more reason for this in the next case. But before we turn to the next case, I consider two replies to the case of Norman.

⁷See Goldman (1979).

⁸Bonjour (1980, 21).

⁹For a similar take on Norman see McCain and Moretti (2021, 70-74).

¹⁰See Pryor (2000).

2.2.1 Appeal to defeaters

A tempting reply is that Norman's belief is undermined by the fact that he has no evidence or reasons for or against the general power of clairvoyance. Alvin Goldman (1986) takes this line. He writes,

Norman ought to reason along the following lines: 'If I had a clairvoyant power, I would surely find some evidence for this. I would find myself believing things in otherwise inexplicable ways, and when these things were checked by other reliable processes, they would usually check out positively. Since I lack any such signs, I apparently do not possess reliable clairvoyant processes.' Since Norman ought to reason this way, he is *ex ante* justified in believing that he does not possess reliable clairvoyant processes. This undermines his belief . . . ¹¹

At issue with Goldman's response is whether justification requires that one have a perspective on the faculties one uses to form belief. In a normal case where we form a belief on the basis of vision, we have lots of information about how vision tracks objects in our immediate environment. We have used vision in the past, we know that the quality of vision changes with lighting and distance, we recall how vision intersects with other senses, and so on. Goldman's response to the case of Norman suggests that whenever a person lacks a perspective on their cognitive faculties, beliefs based on those faculties would be unjustified. On my view, this is correct. A belief formed by a cognitive faculty is justified only if it is independently plausible that the cognitive faculty is reliable with respect to that belief. So far from resisting the support that Norman offers to (†), Goldman's appeal to defeaters further supports the case.

Perry Hendricks (2020) focuses on an argument against externalism from cases like Norman. His aim is to show how a case like Norman's does not support the claim that justification requires a subject to have a perspective on her cognitive faculties. Hendricks formulates the argument thusly.

1. If (a) the subject holding a belief isn't aware of what that belief has going for it, then (b) she isn't aware of how its status is any different from a stray hunch or an arbitrary conviction.
2. If (b) S isn't aware of how its status is any different from a stray hunch or arbitrary conviction, then (c) from her perspective it is an accident that her belief is true.

¹¹Goldman (1986, 112)

3. Therefore, (a) the subject holding a belief isn't aware of what that belief has going for it, then (c) from her perspective it is an accident that her belief is true.¹²

Hendricks's argument is useful for our purposes because it connects the lack of a perspective on one's cognitive faculties with possessing a defeater. If this argument is sound then it shows that there is no justification apart from a broader perspective on one's belief forming faculties.

Hendricks resists this argument by arguing that both (1) and (2) are false. Hendricks's reasons for resisting premise (1) and (2) are brief and closely related. His key contention is that if a subject's belief meets externalist standards for justification *and* the subject isn't aware of any defeaters for the belief then the subject can distinguish that justified belief from a stray hunch.¹³ An externalist doesn't require that a subject be aware of the positive aspects of belief. Consequently, (1) is false.

Moreover, regarding (2), Hendricks claims that "p appearing accidentally true from S's perspective is a psychological property."¹⁴ On his view (2) states that stray hunches and arbitrary convictions carry the psychological property of seeming to a person to be true by accident. But Hendricks claims that some stray hunches may lack this property; as when a person has a hunch that turns out to be true and then exclaims "I knew it." Hence, (2) is false.

The crux turns on how to understand a lack of a perspective on a belief with the notions of a stray hunch, arbitrary conviction, and being accidentally true from one's perspective. We will see below in the second response to Norman, the waters here are murky. As I observed above, when we form a belief, we often have a perspective on the manner in which we formed the belief. Hendricks's position, and the position of externalists more generally, is to focus on a case in which a person isn't aware of a broader perspective on their beliefs and isn't aware of any defeaters for that belief. I myself find this quite difficult to conceive because it is not a normal case at all. The cases that are discussed in the literature are ones like Norman where there is a conviction (e.g., a belief) that is not connected to anything else. In those cases, I do find that those convictions are indistinguishable from stray hunches, and, as such, it is an accident from my perspective that those beliefs are true.

¹²See Hendricks (2020, 328-9). I focus only on his argument from (1) to (3).

¹³Hendricks (2020, 329).

¹⁴Hendricks (2020, 330).

2.2.2 Basic belief forming mechanisms

We saw above that Michael Bergmann distinguishes between learned and unlearned doxastic responses to capture the idea that some reliable belief forming processes do not yield justification. Jack Lyons (2009) develops a similar response by appeal to recent work in cognitive science. He argues for *inferential reliabilism*. This is the view that

(IR) (i) a basic belief is prima facie justified iff it is the result of a reliable cognitive process; and (ii) a nonbasic belief is prima facie justified iff it is the result of a reliable *inferential* process, the inputs to which are themselves (prima facie) justified.¹⁵

(IR) implies that reliability isn't sufficient for justification. Consequently, Norman isn't a counterexample to it. The distinction between basic and non-basic beliefs (or, in Bergmann's terminology, learned and unlearned doxastic responses) is key for inferential reliabilism. If the Norman case were a case of a basic belief then it would be a counterexample. Lyons maintains that Norman's clairvoyant belief isn't a perceptual belief; only perceptual beliefs are basic beliefs.

Perceptual beliefs are outputs of a perceptual system. On Lyons's view, perceptual systems have the following four features.¹⁶

- (a) Its lowest level inputs are energy transductions across sense organs.
- (b) None of its inputs to any of its subsystems are under the voluntary control of the larger organism.
- (c) It's inferentially opaque (i.e., its doxastic outputs are cognitively spontaneous).
- (d) The system has developed as the result of some combination of learning and innate constraints.

Inferentialist reliabilism handles the Norman case by observing that (a) is false for Norman's belief; there is no energy transduction in the formation of the belief.¹⁷ Hence, Norman's belief isn't a perceptual belief and isn't basic.

Lyons entertains the response that Norman's clairvoyance system does involve a relevant kind of energy transduction. He writes,

¹⁵Lyons (2009, 112)

¹⁶See Lyons (2009, 117)

¹⁷Lyons (2009, 118)

At this point, however, the intuitions become hazy. Was Norman born with some funnel-shaped organ on his head that collects C-waves? Does he have some special brain structure that the rest of us lack? If so, it is not so obvious that he's *not* (prima facie) justified.¹⁸

Lyons continues to argue that even if Norman's clairvoyant system satisfies (a), it doesn't satisfy (d) in virtue of BonJour's stipulation that Norman has "no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power or for or against the thesis that he possesses it."¹⁹ Lyons claims that "this would be quite unusual if this capacity is one he's had for a long time."²⁰ Presumably, the thought is that capacities a person has had for a long time are such that a person gains evidence that they do possess that capacity by using it on such occasions and coming to have it confirmed by other capacities. But this thought doesn't get at the judgments needed to defend (IR); for here we see that satisfying (d) very well looks like it implies a subject has relevant evidence about the reliability of the capacity.

Lyons develops a new case in an attempt to distinguish a subject that satisfies (a)-(d) without having relevant evidence about the reliability of the capacity.

Nyrmoon is a member of an alien species for whom clairvoyance is a normal cognitive capacity, which develops in much the same way as vision does for humans. Members of Nyrmoon's species have specialized internal organs that are receptive to the highly attenuated energy signals from distant events; as an infant, all was a "blooming buzzing confusion" for Nyrmoon, until, like everyone else, he learned to attend selectively, recognize various objects, and filter out coherent distant events. Nyrmoon, however, is so extremely unreflective that he has no beliefs (a fortiori, no justified beliefs) about the reliability of his clairvoyance. One day he forms, as the result of clairvoyance, the belief that his house is on fire (which it is).²¹

Lyons holds that Nyrmoon is justified in his belief that his house is on fire. But the case is described so as Nyrmoon has no evidence about the reliability of his clairvoyance. Admittedly, Lyons does not explicitly say that Nyrmoon has no *evidence*; only that he has no *belief* about the reliability of clairvoyance. This is because the standard reading of the Norman case is to support the requirement

¹⁸Lyons (2009, 118)

¹⁹BonJour (1985, 41)

²⁰Lyons (2009, 118)

²¹Lyons (2009, 119)

that justification requires a metabelief that clairvoyance is reliable. My view is that an explicit metabelief is not required; only evidence that makes that metabelief reasonable. Hence, I'll interpret the case as one of a lack of evidence.

The problem is that Lyons's Nyrmoon is an impossible case. Nyrmoon "*learns* to attend selectively, recognize various objects, and filter out coherent distant events." But all this involves acquiring evidence that clairvoyance is a faculty that produces a coherent and true perspective on the world.

To fill this out, let's explore in some detail how Nyrmoon may come to master his clairvoyant power.

Early Development As an infant, Nyrmoon is overwhelmed by the constant influx of highly attenuated energy signals. These signals, originating from distant events, bombard his receptive organs, creating a chaotic and overwhelming sensory experience. Everything is a 'blooming buzzing confusion,' a symphony of distant occurrences with no discernible pattern or order.

Initial Training Nyrmoon's parents, having undergone the same developmental process, provide initial guidance. They use calming techniques to help him focus and ignore the symphony of distant signals. They teach him simple exercises to close off his receptive organs temporarily, giving him moments of peace to anchor his awareness.

Nyrmoon's parents then teach him how to differentiate between the different senses. These early lessons involve distinguishing the clairvoyant energy signals from (e.g.) visual and auditory signals. His parents may expose him to controlled, low-intensity signals and help him identify their sources. For instance, they might focus on the energy from a nearby flowing river or a distant mountain's unique vibrational frequency.

Developing Focus and Selective Attention A third stage may involve meditative practices in which Nyrmoon learns to calm his mind and body and focus on the attenuated signals. These practices might involve rhythmic breathing, visualizations, and mental exercises designed to sharpen his concentration. Over time, he becomes adept at entering a trance-like state, allowing him to filter out the surrounding noise and hone in on particular energy signatures.

In this developmental state, his parents train him on specific objects. They introduce him to the distinct energy patterns produced by distant objects. They may start with simple, nearby objects like stones, plants, or water sources, gradually progressing to more complex and distant events. Through repetitive exposure and practice,

Nyrmoon learns to recognize and categorize these energy patterns, associating them with specific objects and events.

Filtering and Recognizing Coherent Distant Events The next stage in Nyrmoon’s developmental produce is a more advanced sensory filtering. As he goes older, Nyrmoon’s training intensifies. He practices isolating individual energy signals from a sea of chaotic inputs. This requires intense focus and the ability to mentally “tune out” irrelevant signals, akin to finding a specific radio frequency amidst static. His specialized organs played a crucial role, evolving to become more adept at discerning subtle differences in energy patterns. This allowed him to filter out background noise and focus on coherent distant events.

This more advanced training involves pattern recognition and predictive abilities. Nyrmoon develops the ability to recognize recurring patterns in the energy signals he perceives. This pattern recognition is key to understanding and predicting distant events. By correlating these patterns with known events and outcomes, he comes to interpret the signals more accurately. For example, a certain fluctuation in energy might indicate a storm brewing in a distant region, while another might signify the movement of a large herd of animals.

Mastery and Application At this point, Nyrmoon applies his new skill in real time to novel situations. He may locate new natural disasters before other means of detecting them are possible. He may sense an impending tsunami and warn his community before it strikes. His selective attention skills allow him to focus on specific individuals or events, providing insights and warnings that prevent dangers or facilitate beneficial outcomes.

Continual Refinement Nyrmoon’s journey in mastering his clairvoyant power doesn’t end; he continues to refine his skills, learning to perceive even fainter and more distant signals. His ability to filter and interpret these signals became second nature, integrating seamlessly into his daily life.

Upshot This fictional description of how Nyrmoon “learns to attend selectively, recognize various objects, and filter out coherent distant events” emphasizes the intricate interplay between innate ability, structured training, and continual practice. This involves Nyrmoon knowing what it is he is doing when he is developing his clairvoyant power—“I am calming my mind”, “I am attending to this signal”, “I am noticing the difference between this signal and that signal”, etc. As the detailed description demonstrates the move from a “blooming, buzzing confusion” to a rich,

coherent representation of distant events involves a complex, reflective knowledge of the specific sensory faculty. To the extent that Nyrmoon is justified in believing that his house is on fire it is because it is independently plausible that his token experience is reliable.

2.3 Racist dinner table guest

Let's turn our attention to a more recent example from Amia Srinivasan.

Nour, a young British woman of Arab descent, is invited to dinner at the home of a white friend from university. The host, Nour's friend's father, is polite and welcoming to Nour. He is generous with the food and wine, and asks Nour a series of questions about herself. Everyone laughs and talks amiably. As Nour comes away, however, she is unable to shake the conviction that her friend's father is racist against Arabs. But replaying the evening in her head she finds it impossible to recover just what actions on the host's part could be thought to be racist, or what would justify her belief in the host's racism. If pressed, Nour would say she 'just knows' that her host is racist. In fact, the host is racist – he thinks of Arabs as inherently fanatic, dangerous and backwards – and as a result did send off subtle cues that Nour subconsciously registered and processed. It is this subconscious sensitivity that led to her belief that her host is racist.²²

Srinivasan intends this case to support a radical externalism in which a person need not have any supporting evidence to know a claim. On her preferred reading, Nour knows that the host is racist even though Nour has no relevant evidence for this.

The case can be understood in two different ways depending on how we understand Nour's background evidence. On one reading, the background evidence makes it plausible that Nour's conviction that the host is racist is reliable, and, accordingly, Nour reasonably believes that the host is racist. On the other reading, the background evidence does not make it plausible that Nour's conviction is reliable, and, accordingly, she does not reasonably believe that the host is racist.

On the first reading, Nour has relevant background evidence. The relevant evidence that Nour might have about the host's racism can be divided into *focal evidence* and *background evidence*. Focal evidence is what she can bring to mind that directly

²²Srinivasan (2020, 395).

bears on the host's racism. This would be relevant facts from the dinner party and relevant facts about what she knows about the host. As the case is described, there is no relevant focal evidence. But on the first reading we are considering here, Nour does possess relevant background evidence. What could this evidence be? It may be similar occasions in the past were Nour has encountered subtle racist cues and has later come to have them confirmed. She may be also aware of racial tensions, relevant prior probabilities of racist attitudes, and the way racist attitudes are subtly expressed. In this context, her conviction that the host is racist is independently plausible given the background information she is justified in believing. Accordingly, Nour is reasonable in believing that her host is racist.

On the second reading, Nour does not have relevant background evidence. As with the first reading, Nour does not have any relevant focal evidence that the host is racist. There is nothing that she can recall from that evening that supports her belief that the host is racist. Moreover, on the current interpretation, there is no relevant background evidence that makes it plausible that her conviction is reliable. Nour is not aware of past experiences with subtle forms of racism. She does not know of the relevant prior probabilities of racism. Moreover, she is not aware of ways in which racist attitudes may be subtly expressed. Nevertheless, she finds herself believing that the host is racist against Arabs. In this context, Nour is unreasonable in believing that the host is racist. It would be akin to Novice believing that there is a hornbeam tree or Norman believing that the President is in New York. There is nothing in her perspective that supports the reliability of her conviction in the host's racism against Arabs.

2.4 Summary

We've examined three central cases of experiential justification and the attempts to elude a requirement that experiential justification requires a broader perspective on one's experiential faculties that makes it plausible that the token experience is reliable. The cases directly support (†) and the reasons against (†) are inadequate.

3 Objections

3.1 The generality problem

Reliabilist views of justification claim that a belief is prima facie justified if and only if it is produced by a reliable process. There are token processes—a specific datable occurrence of a process, and there are process types—a general kind of process.

Reliability cannot be a property of a token process because a token process is a single thing. A belief produced by a token process is either true or false. Reliability, thus, must be a property of a process type. But each token process is an instance of innumerable many different process types whose reliability varies according to the specific type. Reliabilism thus owes us an account of process types. This is known as the generality problem.²³

An objection of (†) is that it too requires an account of process types. It says:

- (†) A token experience e justifies a belief that p only if it is independently plausible that e is a token of an experience type that reliably indicates whether p .

A key difference between a reliabilism and (†) is that the former ties justification to the reliability of a general process regardless of the content of the belief. By contrast, (†) specifies that the token experience justifies a specific belief only if the token experience is reliable with respect to the specific belief. (†), thus, specifies the relevant type as one that indicates the truth of the target proposition. Consider again the case of Nyrmoon. According to (†), Nyrmoon's clairvoyant experience justified him in believing his house is on fire only if Nyrmoon has evidence that makes it plausible that this token experience is reliable with respect to that belief. Nyrmoon's training allows him to identify the relevant clairvoyant experience as one that does reliably indicate that claim.

3.2 The over-intellectualization objection

Let us now turn to a more theoretical objection. On the view I am defending, a person is justified in believing a claim presented in experience only if they have evidence that makes it independently plausible that such experiences are reliable with respect to the experientially presented claim. Yet we often attribute knowledge and reasonability to children and animals. When young Timmy looks outside and sees a dog, Timmy knows that Lassie is in the yard. Yet Timmy does not have the cognitive resources to offer a compelling argument that vision is reliable.

Fred Dretske pursued an account of knowledge that captures our natural knowledge attributions to children and animals. Dretske explains,

²³See Conee and Feldman (1998) for the canonical statement of the generality problem.

This characterization of knowledge [information caused belief] is a version of what has come to be called the ‘regularity analysis’ of knowledge (Armstrong (1973); Dretske (1969, 1971)). It is an attempt to get away from the philosopher’s usual bag of tricks (justification, reasons, evidence, etc.) in order to give a more realistic picture of what perceptual knowledge is. One doesn’t need reasons, evidence, or rational justification for one’s belief that there is wine left in the bottle, if the bottle is sitting in good light directly in front of one. One can see that it is still half-full. And, rightly or wrongly, I wanted a characterization that would at least allow for the possibility that animals (a frog, rat, ape, or my dog) could know things without my having to suppose them capable of the more sophisticated intellectual operations involved in traditional analyses of knowledge.²⁴

Dretske’s ‘information caused belief’ theory of knowledge can seem natural. It is true that we often attribute knowledge and reasonability to individuals who are not able to rehearse an argument for what they know. Yet, as the above examples illustrate, it is also natural to withhold, or even deny, knowledge to individuals who lack relevant evidence to support their beliefs.

Is there a way to balance these two competing intuitions? I think there is a way forward. The key is to recognize that individuals who have beliefs have a wide variety of evidence that may support those beliefs. Knowledge requires belief. If an individual is not capable of believing then that individual is not capable of knowing. A frog lacks beliefs even though the frog is able to track features of its environment. Yet Timmy does have beliefs. He believes that Lassie in the yard. Moreover, he has a wide variety of other beliefs that supports the target belief. He believes that ‘Lassie’ is the dog’s name, that Lassie likes to go outside, that Lassie is playing with a ball, and so on. He also has more theoretical beliefs, though he may not have formulated them explicitly. Timmy believes that his eyes allow him to track objects in his immediate environment and that he has correctly identified objects in his environment on past occasions. Once we take seriously what it is to be a genuine believer, we see that believers are cognitively sophisticated beings that possess a wide variety of information. This fits as well with our discussion of Lyon’s case of Nyrmoon.

Contemporary work in cognitive psychology supports the cognitive sophistication of young children. Alison Gopnik, for instance, writes:

²⁴Dretske (1983, 58).

New theoretical ideas and empirical research show that very young children’s learning and thinking are strikingly similar to much learning and thinking in science. Preschoolers test hypotheses against data and make causal inferences; they learn from statistics and informal experimentation, and from watching and listening to others.²⁵

So, Dretske’s intuition does not threaten the view that experience justifies only if it is independently plausible that it is reliable.

4 Conclusion

Evidence is required for justified belief. Moreover, evidence is required for experiential justification. But experience cannot provide evidence apart from a broader perspective that supports the reliability of experience. The sensibility of evidentialism has significant implications for the epistemology of sensibility.

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²⁵Gopnik (2012, 1623)

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