**Experience as Evidence**

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**Abstract:** This chapter explores whether and when experience can be evidence. It argues that experiences can be evidence, and that this claim is compatible with just about any epistemological theory. It evaluates the most promising argument for the conclusion that certain experiences (e.g., seeming to see) are always evidence for believing what the experiences represent. While the argument is very promising, one premise needs further defense. The argument also depends on a certain connection between reasonable belief and the first person perspective.

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**1. Introduction**

This chapter explores whether and when experience can be evidence. In sections 2 and 3, I clarify “experience” and “evidence”, respectively. In section 4, I argue that *sometimes* experience is evidence. In section 5, I consider at length whether certain kinds of experience are *always* evidence.

**2. What is experience?**

Three time pro-bowlers have a lot of *experience* playing NFL football. Someone who drives a campervan across New Zealand will have a wonderful *experience*. These notions of experience are not the one I am concerned with, though they are probably related.

Here experiences are in the same broad category as beliefs, desires, moods, and thoughts. Experiences are “in the mind”.[[1]](#footnote-1) They are mental states, mental events, mental modes, or something along those lines. They also have phenomenal character. To have *phenomenal character* is to have a conscious “feel”, for there to be something it’s like to have it in one’s consciousness. Consider the pains associated with a headache. There is something it’s like to have such a pain. There is also something it is like when you seem to see a squirrel ripping its way into your screen porch. Let me tell you, it’s not pleasant.

As an approximation, **experience** is a mental state or event that has phenomenal character.[[2]](#footnote-2) In addition to pains, perceptual experiences are paradigmatic kinds of experiences, e.g., seeming to see or hear something. They often have rich phenomenal character. The squirrel will seem to have a specific shape and shade of gray. The sound of the screen ripping will ingrain itself in your memory. Memory often involves experiences with rather rich phenomenal character. When you seem to remember the squirrel ripping into your porch, you may get imagery that is essentially a degraded version of the original perceptual experience.

Other experiences have more subtle kinds of phenomenal character, including plainer memorial seemings and intellectual intuitions. You seem to remember that the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776 and that atoms are composed of electrons, but such memorial seemings are probably not associated with rich sensory phenomenal character. When you remember such things, you don’t typically have “mental images” of people signing a document or electrons orbiting a nucleus. It seems obvious to you that 5+5=10 and that it is morally wrong to torture for fun. I assume, somewhat controversially, that such memorial and intellectual seemings are indeed kinds of experience.

As the above examples illustrate, experience often has propositional content.[[3]](#footnote-3) A proposition is a representation that can be true or false. I seem to see *that the squirrel is ripping its way into my screen porch*. The italicized phrase can be true or false. Since it is the content of the experience, the experience can truly represent or falsely represent. It is controversial exactly which propositions can serve as the content of experiences. The above examples include experiences that represent the world around you, historical events, math, and morality. Suppose these examples are genuine. If experience can be evidence, then experience may provide us with evidence on a diverse array of topics. But what exactly is evidence?[[4]](#footnote-4)

**3. What is Evidence (for the purposes of this chapter)?**

The term “evidence” is ambiguous, which partly explains the importance of this volume. A gloss from Tom Kelly will point us in the right direction: “evidence, whatever else it is, is the kind of thing which can make a difference to what one is *justified* in believing or…what it is *reasonable* for one to believe” (2014: §1 emphasis in original). (For simplicity, I use “justified”, “reasonable”, “rational”, and their cognates interchangeably.)

More specifically, evidence can make at least two kinds of difference: it can make it reasonable to believe something and it can it *un*reasonable to believe something. I look out the sliding glass door, and I come to know—and justifiably believe—that the screen is torn in a new place, the porch furniture is chewed, and there is fresh squirrel scat. In the absence of further considerations, these justified beliefs are evidence that *makes it reasonable* to believe that the abominable squirrel has, yet again, torn its way into my screen porch.

To illustrate the second kind of difference, we can embellish the example. After forming the belief that the squirrel did it, I might acquire new evidence that makes this otherwise reasonable belief *un*reasonable. A guilty confession and video recording of my kids framing the squirrel would make it unreasonable to believe that the squirrel did it.

My justified beliefs that there is a new tear, chewed furniture, and fresh squirrel scat still exert power to make it reasonable to believe that the squirrel did it even when other information, such as the confession, neutralizes or overwhelms this power. Analogously, I may be exerting genuine upward force on a bench press bar even if it is overwhelmed by the bar’s weight and the bar is moving down. Evidence’s *power to make a difference* is more central to what evidence is than its *actually making a difference*. The justified beliefs about the state of the porch don’t cease to be evidence in favor of believing that the squirrel did it when I acquire new information which, all things considered, makes it unreasonable to believe that the squirrel did it.

Something has **justifying power** with respect to believing P, roughly, when it has some tendency to make it reasonable to believe P. Something has **committing power** with respect to believing P, roughly, when it has some tendency to make it *un*reasonable to disbelieve P, withhold judgment about P, or believe any proposition incompatible with P. Since the guilty confession and video recording commit me to believing that my kids framed the squirrel, it is unreasonable for me to believe that the squirrel did it. Justifying power tends to make it reasonable to do something (e.g., believe P); committing power tends to make it unreasonable to take some range of alternatives (e.g., disbelieve P).

Paradigmatic evidence comes with both kinds of power. In other words, the clearest examples of evidence tend to justify believing something exactly to the extent that the evidence makes it unreasonable to disbelieve, withhold judgement about, or believe something incompatible with it. It is controversial whether all evidence fits this paradigm. To my ear—and no worries if you disagree—justifying power is more central to being evidence than is committing power. So I focus on evidence that has justifying power whether or not it also has committing power.

I focus more specifically on *possessed* evidence, or evidence that is had by a subject. It is common for the detective to have evidence in a confidential investigation that I don’t have. And perhaps something can be evidence even if no one possesses it. Something is evidence when it *has* justificatory power. The evidence is possessed when that power is *exerted*. While I am resting on the bench, I *have the power* to put upward force on the bar but I’m not yet exerting that power. That’s the state that unpossessed evidence is in (if there is such a thing). When evidence is possessed, it exerts its justificatory power for whoever possesses it. In what follows, whenever I talk about evidence, I have in mind *possessed* evidence.

For simplicity, I’ve been assuming that justified belief (or at least justified belief that is true or counts as knowledge) is often a paradigmatic kind of evidence. This assumption is controversial. For we might debate the ontology of evidence, i.e., exactly which kind of thing evidence is. Is the *belief* the evidence? The *propositional content* of the belief? Something else? Similar ontological questions can be raised about any alleged experiential evidence. Would the experience be the evidence? The propositional content of the experience? Something else?

Important issues hang in the balance of such ontological questions, but my focus is on evidence’s connection to (un)reasonable belief. If I think that the justified beliefs about the screen porch’s condition are the evidence and you think that it’s really the content of those beliefs, we’ll still generally agree about which further propositions we are justified in and committed to believing.[[5]](#footnote-5) I will casually say that justified beliefs are evidence and (eventually) that experiences can be evidence, but most of what I say is compatible with any standard account of evidence’s ontology.

**4. Is Experience Ever Evidence?**

We’ll need to refine the operative notion of “evidence” further in this section, but we have enough on the table to begin considering whether experience is ever evidence. The relatively uncontroversial answer is yes, experience is at least sometimes evidence. Recall that evidence paradigmatically has both justificatory and committing power. It is widely agreed that experience has both kinds of power. You stub your toe and reasonably believe that you are in pain. You don’t need an argument. The pain itself, or perhaps your seeming to be in pain, can make it reasonable to believe you are in pain. You also believe that it is bad to be in pain. You don’t need an argument to reasonably hold such a belief. Its seeming obvious that pain is bad is, arguably, something that makes it reasonable to believe that pain is bad. Apparently, then, experience can have justifying power.

Experience can also have committing power. You’ve been told by a credible source that all swans are white. You go to Australia and seem to see a black swan. You keep walking and you seem to see many more. These experiences make it unreasonable or, at least, less reasonable to believe that all swans are white.

Arguably, in each of the above cases, you get both justifying and committing power. The pain of stubbing one’s toe doesn’t merely justify believing that one is in pain, it also commits one to such a belief: in the absence of further considerations, the pain makes it unreasonable for you to disbelieve or withhold judgment that you are in pain. The experience of a black swan doesn’t just make it *un*reasonable to believe that all swans are white; it also makes it *reasonable* to believe some swans *aren’t*.

We need to be careful, though. Evidence paradigmatically has both justificatory and committing power, and we’ve seen that experience often comes with both kinds of power. Yet it doesn’t quite follow that experience is ever evidence. Kelly’s gloss on evidence said that evidence can make a difference to what it’s reasonable to believe. It does not follow that evidence is the *only* thing that can do so. A contrast between two rival epistemological theories will help us refine our conception of evidence, as well as show us that experience can be evidence even if evidence isn’t the only thing to have justificatory power.

Consider **evidentialism**, roughly, the thesis that evidence is the only thing that makes a difference to what it is reasonable for you to believe. Earl Conee and Richard Feldman are the two most prominent proponents of evidentialism and, in at least one place, they claim that experience can be evidence (2008: 88; cf. my 2011: 56). More generally, if experience does have justificatory or committing power, there is plenty of precedent for thinking of it as evidence. Yet this precedent does not apply universally: not everything that is a candidate for having justificatory power is also a candidate for being evidence.

Consider **simple (process) reliabilism**, the view that a belief is reasonable if and only if it was produced by a reliable process, where a **reliable process** is one that produces more true beliefs than false ones.[[6]](#footnote-6) Such a view holds that *a belief’s being produced by a reliable process*—whether anyone is aware of the reliable process or not—has the power to justify the belief.Yet no one holds that the mere fact *that a belief is produced by a reliable process* is evidence that the belief is true—at least, not until the believer has some relevant mental state that brings the fact within the subject’s ken. Facts about reliable processes that are outside your ken may justify your beliefs, but they aren’t “evidential justifiers; they are not pieces of evidence, or reasons” (Goldman and McGrath 2015: 36).

At this point, it may seem that reliabilism will deny that even justified beliefs count as evidence. Simple reliabilism holds that process reliability is sufficient for justification (sufficient for exerting justificatory power) and also *necessary* for justification (necessary for exerting justificatory power). But if process reliability is the only way for justificatory power to be exerted and process reliability is not evidence, can simple reliabilism allow that someone has evidence? Yes. Simple reliabilists generally hold that, most fundamentally, process reliability is the only thing that can exert justificatory power; however, they allow that justified beliefs can derive justificatory power from their role in reliable processes.

Take inference, for example. Suppose I infer *that I will be sore tomorrow morning* from my reasonable belief *that I just completed a rigorous, two hour workout*. This inference is a reliable process that, given simple reliabilism, makes its conclusion belief reasonable. The reliable inferential process is not itself evidence, but evidence is still involved. The justified premise belief inherits or derives its justificatory power from its role in the reliable inferential process. Thus, the justified premise belief is considered evidence.

The way simple reliabilists make room for evidence helps us better understand what (possessed) evidence is. The mere fact *that the belief was produced by a reliable process* is not considered evidence, even if process reliability is what most fundamentally has justificatory power.[[7]](#footnote-7) The evidence is the relevant mental state, the justified premise belief. Since we are ignoring disputes about the ontology of evidence, we have arrived at our final definition of evidence: **evidence** is a mental state or event that exerts justificatory power (cf. Goldman and McGrath 2015: 27).[[8]](#footnote-8)

The reliabilist can make room for experiences as evidence in the same way that she made room for justified beliefs as evidence. She holds that experiences are often a crucial component in the reliable process that produced a belief. My perceptual processes are reliable and typically involve experiences. I reasonably believe that there is a duck in the pond because I seem to see a duck in the pond. Given reliabilism, my belief is justified, most fundamentally, because it was produced by a reliable process. Yet my experience was a mental state that was a crucial part of the process which produced my belief. It justifies my belief, albeit in a derivative way. It therefore counts as evidence.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Perhaps beliefs and experiences are the only things that can be evidence. Perhaps not. It depends on whether there are other kinds of mental states or events with justifying power. If, in the absence of further considerations, anger at Max justifies believing that Max did something wrong, then anger can be evidence. And this is so regardless of whether anger is, strictly, a belief or an experience.

Evidentialism gives evidence a starring role in its theory of reasonable belief. Reliabilism gives it a supporting role. Both, however, accommodate the idea that experience is often evidence. Indeed, almost every epistemological theory can make room for the idea that experience is *at least sometimes* evidence.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is not particularly controversial *whether* experiences can be evidence. We saw above that it’s controversial *how fundamental* evidence is to reasonable belief. In the rest of this chapter, we focus on a controversy concerning when experiences are evidence.

**5. Are experiences (of a certain sort) always evidence?**

*5.1. Experience Enthusiasm*

We’ve seen that experiences are sometimes evidence. Some epistemologists argue that every experience E is evidence for believing that one is having E. Suppose E has the content *that the car is red*. If these epistemologists are right, it doesn’t follow that E is evidence for believing its content*,* namely *that the car is red*, but only evidence *that one is having the experience that the car is red*. Even those who are most enthusiastic about experience’s role in justifying beliefs deny that every experience is evidence *for believing its content*. When you vividly imagine being a millionaire, no one thinks that you thereby gained evidence that you are a millionaire.

**Experience enthusiasts** hold that every experience *with a certain phenomenal character* makes it reasonable to believe its content.[[11]](#footnote-11) They tend to be connoisseurs of phenomenal character, drawing subtle (sham?) distinctions between the phenomenal character of various kinds of experience. They generally agree that imaginations have the wrong phenomenal character and that at least some (part of) perceptual experiences have the “right” phenomenal character. Beyond that, there’s more disagreement about which experiences have the right phenomenal character. The possibilities include seeming to remember, intuition about what’s possible or what’s morally right, and religious experience.

For the purposes of this chapter, I take no stand on what the best version of experience enthusiasm is or on what the “right” kind of phenomenal character is. Since there is wide agreement that visual experience (or some part thereof) generally has the “right” phenomenal character, I’ll present an argument that all instances of seeming to see—that is, all visual experiences—are evidence for their contents. You’ll need to consult the various theories to get more information about which phenomenal character in the experience is the “active ingredient”.

*5.2. The Bad to Resist Belief Argument*

Consider some arbitrary instance of your seeming see something: you seem to see that P.[[12]](#footnote-12) Also, suppose that you have no relevant counterevidence to P or any other consideration that bears on whether P is true. You have neither evidence that P is false nor evidence that your perceptual experiences are unreliable. As far as you know, no one disagrees with you about P and you haven’t ingested any hallucinogens, etc.

The only potentially relevant consideration bearing on whether P is true is, apparently, that you seem to see that P. In this kind of situation, what doxastic attitude (i.e., belief, disbelief, withholding judgment) would it be reasonable for you to take toward P? Many philosophers—even those who ultimately reject experience enthusiasm (e.g., Siegel 2017: xiv-xvi)—find it intuitive that you should believe P. Perhaps the intuitive nature of this answer counts in its favor, as many experience enthusiasts will hold. Yet some experience enthusiasts are more ambitious. They try to milk an argument out of this intuition. You may not bother to believe everything your visual experience tells you. But if you form a doxastic attitude toward P in the relevant circumstances, it’s bad to resist believing P. At least, that’s the driving conviction of what I call the *Bad to Resist Belief Argument*.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The argument begins with the idea that your experience makes certain things *un*reasonable to do.

1. If you seem to see that P in the absence of other relevant considerations, then your experience makes it *un*reasonable to *dis*believe that P (or believe any proposition incompatible with P).

Sane individuals generally do not believe the opposite of what they seem to see, unless they have some special reason to do so. And we’ve stipulated that there are no special reasons—the experience is the only potentially relevant consideration you have bearing on whether P. Why would you disbelieve P when the only relevant consideration bearing on *whether P* is that you seem to see that it’s true?

Your experience also seems to make something else unreasonable:

1. If you seem to see that P in the absence of other relevant considerations, your experience makes it *un*reasonable to withhold judgment about P.

Suppose my laptop is lying broken on the floor. I wonder what caused my laptop to break. The only relevant information I have is that the laptop was sitting firmly on the counter, the laptop is covered with the same sticky goo that is all over my five year old’s fingers, and there are no other people or pets in the house. To withhold judgment about whether my 5 year old broke the computer seems ridiculous. To withhold judgment would be to ignore what’s “staring me in the face”. If you seem to clearly see that some specific thing is in front of you, it seems at least as ridiculous to withhold judgment about whether it’s really there. To do so would be to ignore what appears to be staring you in the face.

So far, we’ve seen that our experience makes it unreasonable to disbelieve or withhold judgment about P. If it’s not reasonable to disbelieve or withhold judgment about P, then it must be reasonable to believe it. Something’s gotta give, right? In other words, there is some reasonable stance that you can take toward P:

1. If you seem to see that P in the absence of other relevant considerations, your experience makes it reasonable to believe that P, disbelieve that P, or withhold judgment about P.

Since we’ve already eliminated the latter two options (reasonable to disbelieve or withhold judgment), we reach our conclusion:

1. Therefore, if you seem to see that P in the absence of other relevant considerations, then your experience makes it reasonable to believe that P.

If we take “you” to be the general “you”, 4 applies to all of us no matter what we seem to see. It says that, no matter what we seem to see, our seeming to see it makes it reasonable to believe it. In other words, it says that seeming to see that P is always evidence for P.

You may wonder whether 4 *always* holds. For example, what if we seem to see a purple penguin perfectly performing a pirouette? We should probably disbelieve what we seem to see, but that’s because we have other relevant information: we know from background knowledge that such a thing is almost certain not to happen. Yet 4 still holds even in this outlandish case. Seeming to see the purple penguin perfectly performing a pirouette is still evidence that there is a purple penguin doing such a thing. In the absence of further considerations, it would be reasonable to believe that there is such a penguin precisely because of your experience. It’s just that we have other evidence which outweighs that experience and makes it, all things considered, unreasonable to believe that there is such a penguin.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Let’s consider the structure of the argument more carefully. 1 and 2, taken together, are the claim that experience commits one to believing its content. For 1 and 2, taken together, tell us that the experience makes it *un*reasonable to disbelieve or withhold judgment about the experience’s content (or believe something incompatible with that content) in the absence of further information.

The third premise rules out the possibility that an experience can have committing power without having justificatory power. Suppose that, in the absence of further considerations, an experience that P can commit one to believing P without making it reasonable to believe P. When that possibility occurs, it will be unreasonable to disbelieve or withhold judgment about P (or believe any incompatible proposition) without being reasonable to believe P. Such situations are called **epistemic dilemmas**, because there is no reasonable doxastic attitude that you can take toward P. You won’t be reasonable if you believe, disbelieve, or withhold judgment. Premise 3 rules out the possibility of epistemic dilemmas. It says that whenever you seem to see something, at least one of your options (believing, disbelieving, withholding judgment) will be reasonable.

The first two premises establish that every experience (of a certain kind) commits one to believing its content. The third premise establishes that, if an experience has committing power, then it also has justificatory power. The argument, then, essentially reasons from the claim *that experiences always have committing power* to the conclusion that *they always have justifying power*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

*5.3. The Weakest Part of the Argument*

The weakest part of the argument, in my view, is the third premise. It is still an open question whether something can commit you to having a belief without justifying that belief. It is an open question whether epistemic dilemmas are possible. Unjustified beliefs are a potential example of something that has committing power without having justificatory power. Unjustified beliefs don’t have justificatory power. They can’t make other beliefs reasonable. Garbage in, garbage out. If some televangelist irrationally believes that bad things happen only to bad people, he can’t reasonably infer that only bad people were killed by the tsunami.

Nonetheless, unreasonable beliefs arguably have committing power. Consider *reductio ad absurdum* reasoning. Tim irrationally believes some philosophical theory T that you regard as ridiculous. You point out that T entails, say, that no one knows their own name. That is, you point out that Tim’s belief that T *commits* him to believing that no one knows their own name. Did you thereby show that it was reasonable for Tim to believe that no one knows their own name? Of course not. By showing that Tim was committed to something absurd, you were showing that he should give up his irrational belief that P. Arguably, what *reductio* reasoning shows us is that it is possible for something to have committing force (with respect to believing that no one knows their own name) without having justifying force in the same respect.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The success of the above argument for experience enthusiasm, then, depends on a successful argument that there are no epistemic dilemmas, or equivalently, that there is always one reasonable doxastic attitude to take toward a proposition.[[17]](#footnote-17) I should also note that, even if we can prove that there are no epistemic dilemmas, it may not follow that the above argument succeeds. We would also need to show that the explanation for why there are no dilemmas is compatible with the claim that experience is always evidence. If we can show that there are no such dilemmas and that the explanation for their non-existence is so compatible, then the above argument would provide a strong reason to be an experience enthusiast.

*5.4. What About the Causal History of an Experience?*

Critics of experience enthusiasm will protest that the causal history of an experience makes a difference to whether it counts as evidence. Suppose Jill seems to see that Jack is angry at her but it only seems that way because of her irrational pre-existing belief that Jack is angry. Critics of experience enthusiasm insist that Jill’s visual experience is not evidence—it lacks justificatory power—precisely because of its causal history (i.e., that it was caused by a prior irrational belief and, indeed, an irrational belief with the same content as the seeming).[[18]](#footnote-18) Experience enthusiasts often reply that they find the critic’s verdict about Jill’s experience counterintuitive.[[19]](#footnote-19) When we consider cases like the Jack and Jill case, why is there disagreement in what the enthusiasts and critics find (counter)intuitive?

The Bad to Resist Belief Argument stresses the first person. It forces you to ask, “given the information I would have available to me in such a situation, should I believe, disbelieve, or withhold judgment?” The causal history objections to experience enthusiasm switch to the third person: they ask us to evaluate a situation in which we know something that the subject doesn’t, namely that her experience has a bad causal history. The switch to the third person invites the worry that the experience enthusiasts and critics may be talking past one another. Experience enthusiasm’s plausibility depends on the assumption that reasonable belief, being tightly connected to the first person perspective, may fall well short of knowledge.[[20]](#footnote-20) The critics suppose, in contrast, that things going well from the first person perspective is not enough for reasonable belief and, therefore, they assume that there is a tighter connection between reasonable belief and knowledge.

I will not decide the winner of this debate here. If the third premise is true, the Bad to Resist Belief Argument strongly supports the existence of a certain type of reasonableness: a type so tightly connected to the first person perspective that the causal history of an experience makes no difference to whether that experience is evidence. However, if experience enthusiasts can’t successfully explain the importance of this alleged type of reasonableness in a way that fits well with their experience enthusiasm, then we may have to side with the critics after all.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**Conclusion**

Experiences are mental events with phenomenal character, and so there is something it’s consciously like to have them (§2). Evidence is, roughly, a mental state that exerts justificatory power, and paradigmatically, evidence also exerts committing power too. In the absence of further considerations, if you have paradigmatic evidence for P, then it is reasonable for you to believe P and unreasonable for you to disbelieve or withhold judgment about it (§3-4). While there is disagreement about how fundamental evidence is for reasonable belief, almost every epistemological theory makes room for the idea that experience is at least sometimes evidence (§4).

Experience enthusiasm is the view that experiences with certain kinds of phenomenal character are always evidence. Many people, including critics, find some version of experience enthusiasm intuitive. The Bad to Resist Belief argument is intended to show that experience enthusiasm is true, but it is inconclusive. Consider a situation in which you have an experience that P (where the experience has the “right” phenomenal character) in the absence of further considerations. In such a situation, it is unreasonable to disbelieve P or withhold judgment about it. What isn’t clear is whether it follows that it’s reasonable to believe P. If it does, then experience enthusiasm is true (§5).[[22]](#footnote-22)

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1. Note that I said in the *mind*, not in the head. Phenomenal externalism is the view that phenomenal character does *not* supervene on a subject’s internal states. It may be determined, for example, by relations to external objects. As I understand phenomenal externalism, it denies that phenomenal character is in the head, but it doesn’t deny that phenomenal character is in the mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We can arrive at a more precise understanding of experience by relying on Bayne and Chalmers’ distinction between *phenomenally conscious states* and *phenomenal states* (2003: 28-9). Suppose there is something it’s like for you to believe that Paris is in France. We can allow that the belief is phenomenally conscious, i.e., we can allow that it exemplifies phenomenal character. Yet the belief is not itself the exemplification of this phenomenal character, and it is not itself individuated solely by its phenomenal character. Experiences are *phenomenal states*, i.e., they are the exemplification of phenomenal character and are individuated solely by their phenomenal character. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This claim is controversial (see, e.g., Travis 2004), despite its relative modesty. I’m not assuming that perceptual experiences are individuated by representational content or that the fundamental nature of experience is representational. Nor am I assuming that perceptual content is conceptual. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Discussion in the Board Certified Epistemologists group helped improve this section. Thanks to those who participated! [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Williamson (2000, ch 9) holds that justified belief is not sufficient for evidence, and so he and I will disagree about which further beliefs are justified. Yet the disagreement is not driven by our differing accounts of evidence’s ontology (experience vs proposition) but our claims about what normative statuses are sufficient for evidence (justified belief vs knowledge). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I focus on process reliabilism because it is the bigger threat to whether experience is sometimes evidence. Indicator reliabilism holds, roughly, that a mental state justifies a belief whenever the mental state reliably indicates the truth of the belief. It is easy to see that experiences can have justificatory power on such a view. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, Lyons (2009: 25, 30), Goldman and McGrath (2015: 36). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Alternative accounts of evidence’s ontology will hold that the evidence isn’t strictly the premise belief but rather its propositional content or the fact that makes the belief true. Yet these accounts will still demand some connection to the subject’s mental states or events. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lyons (2009: 74-6) disagrees. Since he holds that all evidential justification is justification by transmission and that experiences can’t be justified (and so can’t transmit justification), he infers that experiences can’t be evidence. I reject his assumption that all evidential justification is justification by transmission. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Even Williamson-style knowledge first epistemology can make room for the idea that experience is evidence or that certain kinds of experience that P make P part of one’s evidence. Suppose I know P on the basis of perception. My experiencing P might partly constitute my perceptual knowledge that P. And we might insist that knowing P suffices for having justification that P. Thus, my experience that P has the (derivative) power to make P justified and so counts as evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I ignore the differences between enthusiasts, so that I can focus on an argument that is close to all their hearts. Enthusiasts include the proponents of phenomenal conservatism (Huemer, Tucker), as well as views that defend the evidential value of experience within a certain domain, such as perceptual dogmatism (Jim Pryor) or intellectual dogmatism (Bengson, Chudnoff). Some experience enthusiasts hold that all evidence ultimately boils down to experience, and so endorse the (misleadingly named) phenomenal conception of evidence, the thesis that a subject’s evidence supervenes on her non-factive mental states. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This argument is worded on the assumption that perceptual experiences have content. A plausible version of this argument can be presented without explicitly assuming that perceptual experiences have content; however, I worry that the intuitions that lead philosophers to deny that experiences have content tend to challenge the intuitions behind the Bad to Resist Belief Argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bengson (2015: 738-40) endorses something like this argument. Huemer gives a superficially similar argument, which I discuss in nt 15 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As good Bayesians, shouldn’t we always have some prior probability distribution for every possible circumstance that we might seem to see? If so, then there is *never* a case in which an experience will be the only relevant information, as my set-up supposes. In reply, it’s not clear to me that we should be good Bayesians when we explicate informal notions, such as ‘reasonable’ or ‘unreasonable’. Nor is it clear that evidence, in the sense I’ve been discussing it here, is the same thing that goes by ‘evidence’ in Bayesian theories. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Huemer (2006, 2013) defends an argument that is, in certain respects, similar to the one presented here, but Huemer’s reasoning is different. He assumes the **Rational Explanation Thesis:** if one experience is evidence and the other isn’t, then one must have a rational explanation for why one experience is evidence and the other isn’t (see premise 6 on 2013: 746). The issue here is meta-coherence: if you rationally treat one experience as evidence and not the other, then you must now possess some rational explanation for why these experiences can be treated differently. To secure Huemer’s conclusion that a certain kind of experience is *always* evidence (or always has justifying power), Huemer must assume that having a rational explanation is necessary *regardless* of whether one actually reflects on which of one’s experiences are evidence.

    I reject the Rational Explanation Assumption, and it is incompatible with Huemer’s own “Happy Coincidences” solution to meta-coherence puzzles. This solution claims, first, that you don’t need a meta-justification until you reflect on your first-level justification. It claims, second, that when you reflect an independent source may provide the needed meta-justification by a happy coincidence (2011, section 6). But if the need for the meta-justification (e.g., an explanation of why one experience is evidence and the other isn’t) doesn’t apply until you reflect, then the Rational Explanation Thesis is false. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. If you endorse the first two premises of the Bad to Resist Belief argument and the causal history objection mentioned in the next sub-section, then you have an additional reason to think that something can have committing force without justifying force. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I’m focused on dilemmas *internal* to reasonableness/rationality. In contrast, Nick Hughes (forthcoming) defends the existence of epistemic dilemmas that involve the *interaction* of reasonableness and truth. The (non-)existence of such dilemmas is irrelevant to the success of the Bad to Resist Belief Argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See, e.g., Siegel 2012, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See, e.g., Chudnoff (forthcoming) and Huemer (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Proponents of experience enthusiasm must reject, for example, the idea that “The property of being doxastically justified just is that property which turns true unGettiered belief into knowledge” (Goldberg 2012: 240). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. It’s also worth mentioning that sometimes critics issue causal history objections to experience enthusiasm at their own peril. See my 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Thanks to Ryan Byerly, HR Gentry, Clayton Littlejohn, and Declan Smithies for very helpful comments on earlier drafts. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)