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Sklar on Methodological Conservatism

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Proponents of the principle of methodological (or epistemic) conservatism face the burden of formulating a version of the principle that has the proper strength. On the most straightforward rendering, methodological conservatism would provide that a belief is justified for someone simply in virtue of being held by that person. But if this were so, the notion of justified belief would collapse into that of belief as such, and methodological conservatism could not in any meaningful sense be a taken as a constraint on *justified* belief.

Of course, the principle may fare better if given a weaker formulation. In a careful and illuminating study, Lawrence Sklar presents an especially attractive version of methodological conservatism.[1] Despite its virtues, however, Sklar's proposal is, I think, unsound.

(i)

According to Sklar, we should understand methodological conservatism in this way:

> (MC) If you believe some proposition, on the basis of whatever positive warrant may accrue to it from the evidence, a priori plausibility, and so forth, it is unreasonable to cease to believe the proposition to be true merely because of the existence of, or knowledge of the existence of, alternative incompatible hypotheses whose positive warrant is no greater than that of the proposition already believed. (p. 28).

Thus, conservatism governs the choice among theories only where that choice is underdetermined by the evidence and by other epistemic principles.

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[1] See Lawrence Sklar (1975). Page references in the text are to the reprinted version.

Sklar makes an important distinction between two sorts of underdetermination. The first he calls "transient" underdetermination. Transient underdetermination obtains at a particular time, when the available evidence (plus constraints other than conservatism) is insufficient to decide between competing theories. However, the possibility remains open that the future accumulation of additional evidence will tell in favor of one of the rival theories. By contrast, "radical" underdetermination arises when no possible evidence (plus constraints other than conservatism) would yield a basis for preferring a theory to its competitors. Sklar means (MC) to apply in cases of both transient and radical underdetermination (pp. 29–30).

What would things be like if Sklar's (MC) did hold? In particular, what would they be like if (MC) applied in cases of transient underdetermination? Consider the following situation:

> A physicist, call him Larry, is trying to make a precise measurement of a certain quantity. He determines that there is noise in the signal going to his measuring device, and he is concerned to identify the source of that noise. Given the noise's signature, it occurs to Larry that its source may be fluctuations in the magnetic field around his apparatus; since no other possibility suggests itself at the time, Larry comes to believe that the noise is due to variations in the magnetic field. Later, however, it occurs to Larry that the noise might just as well be due a mechanical vibration in some component of his set-up. Both the magnetic fluctuation and the mechanical vibration would have the right signature, but there is no *more* reason to suspect the vibrations than the magnetic field.

In Sklar's terms, the original hypothesis that the noise comes from variations in the magnetic field has positive warrant derived from the evidence, and its competitor (that the noise is due to mechanical vibration) has no more positive warrant than the original hypothesis. According to (MC), the scientist is entitled to go on believing that the ambient magnetic field is the source of the noise—but that's not so. Given the availability of the alternative hypothesis, the scientist will properly alter his original conviction about the source of the noise; he might say that now he has no belief about it one way or the other.[2] One can think of any number of cases, real or made-up, that would fit this pattern. I conclude that (MC) as it stands is incorrect.

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[2] Sklar describes, in very abstract terms, a situation like this (p. 42), but he doesn't attribute the same significance to it that I have.

The counterexample I have offered involves the application of (MC) in a case of transient underdetermination. The failure of (MC) in such a context would suggest that its application ought to be restricted still further, namely to cases of radical underdetermination only. Now, it is controversial whether any instances of radical underdetermination really exist; certainly, we rarely encounter such situations. But it has been claimed that radical underdetermination arises in two cases in particular. First, there appear to be competing theories of the structure of space-time such that these theories are empirically equivalent to one another and equally well satisfy various theoretical desiderata. Second, there are various skeptical scenarios that are incompatible with the everyday view of the world (e.g. that all your experience is caused by some deceptive agent or other). The choice between such skeptical hypotheses and what we ordinarily believe is, one might think, radically underdetermined.[3]

Of course, it is just these problems about space-time and the possibility of perceptual knowledge that make the tenability of methodological conservatism an especially interesting issue. If valid, that principle would yield good reasons for preferring the currently accepted theory of curved space-time and for rejecting the possibility that one's sense experience is massively deceptive.[4] The trouble with employing the restricted (MC) in this way is that its status remains to be decided. If the only test cases for the principle are skepticism and the choice of a space-time theory, we fall into an uncomfortably small circle: Why are we justified in our choices in the test cases? Because those choices are underwritten by the restricted version of (MC). How do we know the restricted version of (MC) is valid? Because its validity explains why we are justified in our choices in the test cases.

Sklar himself doesn't believe that the validity of methodological conservatism can be established in this way.[5] In his view, the strongest support for

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3 I make a distinction between two kinds of skepticism. The one I am considering here denies the possibility of obtaining knowledge of the external world on the basis of sensory data which are not themselves in doubt. A more radical skeptical doctrine is that there can be no knowledge of anything at all, including knowledge about the character of one's experience. This sort of total skepticism is discussed below.

4 Sklar himself is dubious that the principle of conservatism would really help in the choice of a space-time theory (pp. 31–32), although he notes that his assessment is controversial. For a discussion of the application of methodological conservatism to the problem of skepticism, see Thomas Vinci (1983). I myself would deny that Sklar's (MC) applies when skepticism about the external world is at issue, since I think that other explanatory considerations license our rejection of skeptical hypotheses (see my (1990)). It's worth noticing, also, how unsatisfactory it would be to appeal to methodological conservatism in this context. If methodological conservatism were the only reason to reject skeptical hypotheses, we would have to say that a paranoid who actually believes himself to be the victim of sensory manipulation by evil scientists is justified in his belief.

5 Sklar calls this the method of "codification of practice" (p. 35). Of course, an examination of practice may yield a negative result as to the status of the principle, even if (as Sklar

conservatism derives from more abstract considerations about the nature of epistemic justification. Here is his argument: Suppose we reject traditional foundationalism and embrace the doctrine that all justification is "local." To say that justification is local means that there has to be "a body of unchallenged background belief" (p. 44) from which the justification of a given belief arises; without such a background, there can't be any justification at all. The question arises as to what would justify a person in holding the entire corpus of his or her beliefs, as opposed to some different, incompatible corpus. Since the justification of the entire corpus is at issue, there is no body of unquestioned background beliefs left "in reserve" to provide local justification. This seems to leave two possibilities. One could concede that one's beliefs as a body are unjustified, but one thereby succumbs to a thoroughgoing skepticism. Alternatively, one could respond that, so far as one's whole corpus is concerned, "without some reason for change, sticking with what you have is the only rational thing to do" (p. 46). That is, methodological conservatism could be invoked to underwrite the justification of one's beliefs as a whole—heading off the threat of total skepticism.

Sklar hedges his endorsement of this argument, but since he offers it as the best defense of methodological conservatism available, it deserves a close look. Even if we concede the anti-foundationalist and contextualist assumptions of the argument, it has various problematic features Sklar doesn't acknowledge. For one thing, it may be doubted whether the issue of justification for a person's whole corpus of beliefs arises at all. As has often been observed, everyone has good reason to believe that, as things happen, at least one or another of his beliefs is false. In light of this higher-level belief, you can't, it is claimed, justifiably subscribe to your beliefs taken collectively (although they may be justified for you severally). If such a view is correct, it would be wrong-headed to invoke methodological conservatism as justifying a belief that isn't justified, i.e. belief in your entire corpus.

Another complication is that if justification is local, then it is plausible to think that doubt is local as well. That is, doubting is possible only against some background of beliefs not in doubt. It would follow that the entire corpus of your beliefs can't be put in doubt at once. If, in addition, rational belief requires justification only where the belief in question is, or can be, doubtful, no special source of justification is needed to make belief in

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maintains) it can't yield a positive one. For my own part, I don't reject, in general, the testing of epistemic principles against our actual judgments by the method of pursuing "reflective equilibrium." The problem with the re-formulation of (MC) is that the equilibrium to be attained is too narrowly based. If there were a range of unproblematic cases where the revised version of (MC) applied, the situation would be different, but I know of no plausible possibilities other than the two discussed.

one's corpus rational. It would be rational to believe that corpus as a whole because doubting it is impossible, and not because such belief is licensed by some independent principle of methodological conservatism.[6]

I believe that these responses raise important questions about the adequacy of Sklar's argument, but they rest on assumptions that may be problematic. There is, I think, a more general worry that will occur. Suppose that, as Sklar suggests, justification attaches to one's beliefs collectively in virtue of methodological conservatism. Then, either this justification is transmitted to the component beliefs of the corpus or not. If not, the conservatism principle is extraordinarily weak. Its application is restricted to the choice between global beliefs, and it has no significance for general scientific practice or for the philosophically important problems about space-time and skepticism. Moreover, by severing the link between justification of one's entire corpus and justification of its components, the threat of skepticism crucial to Sklar's argument is obviated. As Sklar would have it, the justification of the corpus by methodological conservatism is a necessary condition for the justification of any everyday or scientific belief; hence, the cost of rejecting methodological conservatism is supposed to be conceding that we have no justified beliefs at all. But if the justification of component beliefs isn't tied to that of the corpus as a whole, the component beliefs have, as it were, nothing to lose if the corpus fails to be justified.[7]

It is more plausible, and I think more in line with Sklar's intent, to assume that the justification of the corpus distributes over one's several beliefs. Then Sklar's argument, if sound, supports a stronger version of methodological conservatism than the very weak one just considered. How strong? As strong as the original (MC)—and that's the problem. For, consider again the example of the scientist trying to identify the source of

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6 Sklar seemingly accepts all but the conclusion of this paragraph. He writes, "Since justification and its opposite, challenge, are only local and relative to an assumed background, we need not concern ourselves with such hypothesized total alternatives," yet he goes on to add that the "complete and total answer" to the problem involves some commitment to methodological conservatism (p. 46). I am questioning whether any such further commitment is called for.

7 I am assuming that what Sklar calls a "global corpus of beliefs" (p. 46) is the conjunction of the things one believes severally. Thus, when I say that justification distributes over the corpus, what I mean may be put as: $J(p_1 \,\&\, p_2 \,\&\, \ldots \,\&p_n)$ implies $J(p_1) \,\&\, J(p_2) \,\&\, \ldots\, J(p_n)$. This is a reasonable condition, in that whatever evidence you have to justify any of the p_i is included within the corpus as a whole, and so remains available to justify the p_i in question. As it stands, Sklar's argument that failure of justification for the corpus would result in failure of justification for its components seems to involve the more doubtful principle that a component of a conjunction is justified only if the conjunction is: $-J(p_1 \,\&\, p_2 \,\&\, \ldots \,\&p_n)$ implies $-J(p_1) \,\&\, -J(p_2) \,\&\, \ldots\, -J(p_n)$. But Sklar might not need something so fully general; he might get by with the condition that the combination of your evidence for p_i with other believed propositions ought to preserve justification of p_i, according to something like a total evidence requirement.

the signal noise. His situation can be represented as the choice between two global beliefs. One is everything he already believes (including the belief that the noise is caused by variations in the ambient magnetic field), the other is everything he believes except for the substitution that the noise in the signal is due to mechanical vibration. If methodological conservatism governs the choice of global belief, our scientist is justified in holding the former as his total corpus. Furthermore, assuming that the justification of the corpus distributes over its component beliefs, it will turn out that the scientist is justified in retaining his original belief about the source of the noise, after all. But that's not correct; the scientist would not be so justified. Sklar's argument, if sound, would support (MC), but (MC) is invalid. Accordingly, Sklar's argument must be rejected.

(ii)

I would like to add some remarks about another important aspect of Sklar's discussion. If a principle of methodological conservatism is correct, then two individuals could be justified and unjustified, respectively, in holding the same belief on the basis of exactly the same evidence. It has been claimed that this consequence makes methodological conservatism *ipso facto* untenable, but Sklar disagrees.[8] He uses an analogy to support his view. Suppose that two societies, A and B, are organized differently, but do an equally good job of accomplishing identical social goals. Given the costs of reorganizing one's society, the members of A are justified in seeking to maintain the institutions of A and the members of B are justified in seeking to maintain the institutions of B. Just so, according to Sklar, there could be a positive normative status attached to continuing to believe a proposition you already believe—even though positive normative status would attach to believing something different if you happen to believe *that* (p. 33).

One could dispute the appropriateness of this analogy and the lesson Sklar draws from it. However, I want to focus on whether, and why, epistemic justification obeys the constraint Sklar repudiates, i.e. that if one person is justified in accepting a proposition on the basis of a body of evidence, someone else would not be justified in accepting an incompatible proposition on the basis of the same evidence. Let us consider the implications for inquiry if that constraint did not hold.

It is obvious that any individual's capacity to acquire and process information is much more limited than that of many individuals together. We overcome our individual limitations by sharing information with others (through direct contact, newspapers, books, etc.). This exchange of

[8] See Daniel Goldstick (1971); Sklar demurs on pp. 32–34. This issue was pursued in Daniel Goldstick (1976) and Mark Kaplan and Lawrence Sklar (1976).

information does not consist in communicating evidence only (imagine if science journals published only raw data!); rather, a person often depends upon the acceptability of conclusions from evidence when those conclusions are reported by others. But if different people reached different conclusions from the same evidence, even when no mistakes were made, this sharing of conclusions would break down. For, if you certify as justified conclusions not acceptable to me, I can't rely on the judgments you report to me.

The point here is that the ends of successful inquiry are served by, and perhaps require, some uniformity in what counts as a justified conclusion based upon a given body of evidence. To the extent that methodological conservatism is inimical to that uniformity, there are *prima facie* grounds for rejecting it. It may be, as Sklar urges, that methodological conservatism is also conducive to epistemic efficiency at some other level, and this could be taken as counting in its favor. But it is far from clear that, ultimately, the benefits of methodological conservatism would be worth the costs.[9] [10]

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9 Sklar seems not to disagree with this point as stated (p. 47), but he is unwilling to embrace the demand for uniformity I have been defending.

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