The Epistemic Vice of Dogmatism

Richard Vulich

**I. What is Dogmatism?**

Dogmatism with respect to one’s belief has generally been regarded as an epistemic vice. In this paper I will attempt to identify why dogmatism is epistemically vicious. We will see that dogmatism is a vice, but it is a vice for different reasons depending on whether one is an internalist or an externalist about knowledge and justification.

First of all what concept is being discussed when one says that S is dogmatic with respect to his belief? Dogmatism has been discussed in recent literature, notably by Pryor in the context of anti-skeptical arguments involving knowledge of a core of ‘perceptual seemings’79. In this context dogmatism is the notion that one may be justified in believing and may know certain fundamental beliefs based on perceptual appearances, even though these beliefs are not based on any further supporting reasons or evidence. It would be dogmatic in this context to insist on one’s knowledge or justification for one’s beliefs about certain basic matters of perception like ‘here is a hand’ in the face of the awareness that it is after all possible that one is a brain in a vat and thus has no hands at all. This is one sense of the term dogmatism, but it is not the primary one that I think guides our pre-philosophical intuition that dogmatism is an epistemic vice.

Compare this understanding of dogmatism to another that I think more closely tracks our pre-philosophical conception of it. It is sometimes said of a person that he is dogmatic when it comes to his religious or political views. In these sorts of cases it cannot be said that the subject who is dogmatic with respect to his religious or political belief insists on the justification or knowledge of his belief even though it is not based on any supporting reasons, or alternatively that it is based on a ‘perceptual seeming’. Typically such a subject could articulate some reasons that he relies on in support of the dogmatically held belief in question.

In these cases I propose that we understand dogmatism as the disposition to resist revisions in one’s belief regardless of whether one comes into contact with additional evidence that undermines the justification the subject has for holding the target belief. I use the locution ‘comes into contact with’ intentionally because the dogmatic subject may be spoken of as either refusing to acquire new evidence that he comes into contact with, or as failing to accord the new evidence that he does acquire its’ proper weight and significance. In both sorts of case the subject ‘comes into contact’ with the new potentially undermining evidence, and fails to react to it by revising his confidence in the truth of the dogmatically held belief. This notion of dogmatism can be thought of as the generic conception of which the anti-skeptical dogmatism of Pryor is a species. In both the case of the religious/political dogmatist and the perceptual dogmatist a subject takes himself to know some proposition P, and adopts a policy of either avoiding or ignoring evidence that indicates otherwise. In one case the counter evidence consists of facts about another religious point of view, and in the other case the counter evidence consists of skeptical considerations.

We have now identified the concept of dogmatism as a disposition to behave a certain way in the matter of belief, not an occurrent state of the subject. One may have this disposition without ever manifesting it in overt behavior if the subject never happens to come into contact with undermining evidence against the dogmatically held belief. We can say a belief is a dogmatically held belief just in case it is a belief for which such a disposition exists relative to a given epistemic agent.

In Gilbert Harman’s account a subject adopts the dogmatic disposition on the basis of the following piece of reasoning: “If I know that H is true, I know that any evidence against H is evidence against something that is true; so I know that such evidence is misleading. But I should disregard evidence that I know is misleading. So, once I know that h is true, I am in a position to disregard any future evidence even though I do know a great many different things”80 (Harman, 148).

Saul Kripke also discusses the reasoning that motivates dogmatism, referring to it as a paradox of knowledge81. For Kripke it can be seen to involve the issue of deductive closure. In his statement of the problem he says that a subject may know that P and know that if P is true then this entails that any evidence against P is misleading evidence. If a subject knows both of these propositions then the subject knows that evidence against P is misleading and if the subject wants to avoid being misled, then the subject should resolve not to be influenced by any evidence against P. Kripke sees this as a paradox because the reasoning that leads the subject to adopt the dogmatic disposition with respect to P seems unexceptionable, and yet it seems intuitive that adopting the dogmatic disposition is unacceptable. We seem rationally required to remain open to changings-of-mind with respect to the things we believe, even if we know them. As Kripke says, “The question is why?” (Kripke, 45).

II. Why Dogmatism is Vicious for an Internalist

In my view it is not possible to give a straight answer to this question, the answer that can be provided can take one of two forms depending on the theory of justification and knowledge that one accepts. We are all aware of the two major rival theories of justification and knowledge, internalism and externalism. Internalists believe that the factors that determine whether a belief is justified are accessible to the subject on the basis of introspection. The justificatory factors are transparent to the mind. Externalists, on the other hand, deny this accessibility condition. Externalists argue that whether ones belief is justified depends on factors that are not accessible to the mind on the basis of introspection. The relevant factors for the externalist generally involve the reliability of the process that produces the agent’s belief, something that one cannot know on the basis of introspection alone. Let’s see then how dogmatism would be a vice according to each of these theories.

The internalist believes that a subject has access to the factors that bear on the justification of his beliefs. So the subject has access to the *evidence* which bears on his belief and should be able to tell, in principle, whether a given belief is well supported by that accessible evidence. This is why internalists think of justification in deontic terms, i.e. that one ‘ought not’ to hold unjustified beliefs and it is ‘irresponsible’ to hold unjustified beliefs82. Consider the situation for the internalist dogmatic subject who has acquired some evidence that counters his dogmatically held belief that P.

If this newly acquired evidence is sufficiently weighty it will render S’s existing degree of confidence in P unjustified. It will be true of S after acquiring the contrary evidence that his pre-evidence degree of certainty with respect to P is no longer justified. Furthermore, since we are considering the situation from an internalist point of view it will be true of the dogmatic subject that he has access to the fact that his degree of belief is not the justified one to take in light of the new contrary evidence. This is because internalists believe that the factors that bear on the justificatory status of a belief including what one’s evidence is and how it bears on a believed proposition are accessible on introspection.

So we see one clear reason why the dogmatic disposition with respect to a given proposition is a vice from an internalist point of view. In any case where one believes a proposition dogmatically one will be irrational with respect to it in the event that one acquires sufficiently weighty evidence contrary to what one dogmatically believes. In such a case the subject is irrational on internalist lights because the subject takes an attitude toward the dogmatically believed proposition that is not merited by the evidence that he possesses. Furthermore the subject is in a position to know this about the dogmatic belief since the justificatory factors that bear on his belief are accessible to his introspection. It is this access that the subject has which grounds normative judgments about his belief, such as that it is irresponsible, and that the subject ought to have an open mind.

III. The Subject who has not Come into Contact
with Contrary Evidence

We must consider one more type of case to make our discussion of the internalist treatment of dogmatism complete. So far we have said that an internalist would condemn dogmatism on the grounds that it *could* lead one to hold an irrational belief, a belief that does not fit the evidence that the subject has for it. But not every case of dogmatic belief plays out this way. For example, a subject may have good evidence for his dogmatically held belief that P, and never actually acquire any sufficiently weighty contrary evidence against P. This may be either by design, as in preventing oneself from accessing certain information, or simply because there is no credible contrary evidence available in general. Since this sort of subject cannot be described as holding a degree of confidence in P that does not match the evidence *in his possession* we must consider in what sense his dogmatically held belief is vicious according to an internalist.

Let us consider two classes of dogmatically held beliefs, on the one hand beliefs for which the subject currently possesses good contrary evidence, and on the other hand beliefs for which the subject does not currently possess such evidence. The former sort of dogmatic belief is straightforwardly irrational on internalist grounds as discussed above. The latter sort is not irrational in the same way as the first, but it is still subject to criticism on internalist grounds. The reason for this concerns the way in which the belief is held. If, hypothetically, the subject were to acquire the contrary evidence that he lacks it would not change his mind or cause him to revise his dogmatic belief. So even if no such evidence has yet been acquired we are in a position to say of the subject’s belief now that no amount of evidence could convince the subject otherwise. As such it may not be strictly irrational at some current time t0, but it is believed according to a policy that would dictate believing it irrationally at some future time tn>0, if hypothetically the subject were to acquire the contrary evidence at that later time. One might wonder why it is wrong to hold the belief dogmatically if this hypothetical contrary evidence has not materialized. The answer is that if there is something wrong about holding unjustified beliefs, then by extension there is something wrong with a policy that would require one to hold an unjustified belief in certain situations. The analogy to morality is instructive. If it is morally wrong to kill someone, then a killer is justly condemned for his action. Another man may not have killed anyone but has the disposition to do so should he ever encounter a man wearing pink polka dots. Surely we can say of the man with this disposition that there is something bad and vicious about the state that he is in, even if, as yet, we cannot call him a killer. The same sort of reasoning applies to the cases of dogmatic belief that we are considering. The dogmatic subject is subject to criticism because the tendency that he has to believe irrationally in certain situations is itself a vice, even if these situations have not arisen83. You can never excuse a disposition to do something wrong and unnecessary by appeal to the claim that the conditions that would trigger the disposition have not yet been realized.

One might wonder if there are some very fundamental beliefs that one can remain dogmatic about without vice, such as that the earth rotates around the sun or whatever. The problem with such a suggestion is that it appears unmotivated without supplying some positive reason why maintaining the dogmatic disposition with respect to such beliefs is desirable. Since I see dogmatism as a *disposition* to maintain credence in a proposition in the face of contrary evidence it cannot be claimed that failure to be dogmatic at some time t0 is incompatible with a very high degree of confidence in the target belief at t0, if for example the evidence the subject has for the target proposition is overwhelming at t0. As such one cannot defend dogmatism by saying that it allows us to be appropriately confident of certain basic things in a way that the non-dogmatic believer cannot be.

This is what I believe the internalist can say against dogmatism, that it is wrong because it involves a disposition to maintain irrational beliefs in certain evidential situations. Insofar as an internalist believes that unjustified belief is avoidable and epistemically vicious he must regard as vicious any disposition to maintain unjustified beliefs in certain situations, whether or not those situations have in fact occurred.

IV. Why Dogmatism is Vicious for an Externalist

If one is an externalist about epistemic justification then one will also regard dogmatism as a vice but for different reasons than the ones just discussed. The reason for the difference is that an externalist does not say that one has access to the factors that determine whether ones belief is justified on the basis of introspection, instead the externalist sees the justificatory factors as having to do with the reliability of the process which generated and maintained the belief. As such the externalist cannot explain the vice of dogmatism in terms of it including a disposition to maintain beliefs that do not fit the evidence the subject has for them. Because of the way externalists define justification it is after all possible for a subject to remain justified in believing a given proposition despite the fact that his belief does not match the available evidence. If such a subject is *reliable* in forming the relevant belief then he will be justified in holding it, whether or not he is aware of the fact that his belief was formed reliably, and whether or not his belief matches the evidence that he has for it.

For the externalist a negative epistemic status for a belief is a belief that was not formed reliably. Such a belief is not *justified* according to the externalist standard of epistemic justification. We will now see that when a subject believes a proposition dogmatically the subject does not believe the proposition reliably, and this is the basic reason that dogmatism is a vice from an externalist point of view. To see why this is so let us consider some cases in which a subject believes a proposition dogmatically.

In the recent U.S. elections many conservative pundits and observers were convinced that Mitt Romney would win the election by a wide margin, even though a wealth of good evidence indicated otherwise, from professional polling organizations, to betting markets. Rather than react to this evidence by lowering their confidence in the proposition that Romney would win by a wide margin many of these conservatives took the contrary evidence to be misleading, going as far as to suggest that there was systemic bias involved in the polling and media coverage. With this example in mind let’s consider a standard account of externalist justification to see why such dogmatic belief is not justified according to the externalist.

One popular way that externalist justification has been described is the truth tracking account. Though variations exist I think Nozick’s description of the notion is sufficiently general for our purposes84. His account is given in the form of two subjunctive conditionals that must be true with respect to a given subject S and proposition P in order for S to be justified in believing P. The first conditional is that ‘If not-P then it is not the case that S believes that P’, and the second is that ‘If P, then S believes that P’. The account asks us to consider what the subject would believe in close counterfactual situations in which the belief is false one the one hand, and true on the other. If the subject’s belief does not match the truth-value of the proposition in these counterfactual scenarios then he is not tracking the truth and is therefore not justified. What can we say about the dogmatic conservative now? We can say of him that his belief is not sensitive to the truth of the proposition at all, because he will believe that Romney wins by a large margin in every situation, regardless of the state of the evidence in those situations, and regardless of whether Romney does in fact win or lose in those situations. Since he is dogmatic about P, S will believe it no matter what, and therefore S does not satisfy the first subjunctive; ‘If not-P then it is not the case that S believes P’. Clearly the subject believes P in the not-P worlds, if he didn’t then he would not be dogmatic about P in the actual world. So this dogmatic subject has a belief with a negative epistemic status, unjustified because not truth tracking, and this is due to his dogmatic disposition.

V. Dogmatism and the Negative Coherence Condition

A further negative feature of dogmatism from the point of view of both the internalist and the externalist involves what has come to be known as a ‘negative coherence condition’. A negative coherence condition is the requirement that in order to know a given proposition one must *lack* the belief that the belief in the proposition was formed or sustained unreliably. If one does believe that he is unreliable concerning a proposition, then this subject does not know the proposition, even if, contrary to what he believes, he is in fact reliable. This idea can be thought of as a concession that the externalist makes to certain well-supported internalist intuitions85. As such it is a point of agreement between both internalists and externalists broadly.

Given the acceptability of a negative coherence condition we can see an additional reason for regarding dogmatism as a vice from an externalist point of view. Basically, given the negative coherence condition a dogmatic disposition complicates the transmission of knowledge via testimony. The dogmatic subject will himself fail to know his dogmatically held belief for the straightforward reason that he does not track the truth of the relevant proposition. Generally speaking the dogmatic believer will not take himself to be unreliable with respect to the target proposition, but a third party who is aware of the subject’s dogmatism *will* tend to believe that the belief of the dogmatic subject was not reliably formed or sustained. So then, this third party, aware of the dogmatism of the subject who attests that P, will judge that S’s belief in P is not reliable, and therefore he will be unable to know P on the basis of the dogmatic subject’s testimony alone. In such a case the recipient of the testimony violates the negative coherence condition on knowledge, he thinks that the dogmatic testifier is an unreliable source with respect to P, and so he would regard his own belief in P on the basis of the testimony as an unreliably formed one.

This shows that when one takes a testifier to be dogmatic about what he attests to it is impossible for the testifier to transmit knowledge of what he says to the one who judges him dogmatic. As such, one would do well in the matter of testimony to cultivate the outward appearance of an open-minded person, lest one generate in the recipient of the testimony the belief that the attested proposition is believed unreliably. Interestingly this implies that expressions of total certainty and confidence in what is attested to can in fact destroy the possibility that the confidently held belief is known by others on the basis of the confident testimony.

VI. Conclusion

My goal in this paper has been to explain why it is that dogmatism is an epistemic vice. In particular I demonstrated that dogmatism is a vice for different reasons depending on whether one is an internalist or an externalist about justification and knowledge. If one is an internalist then dogmatism is vicious either because it preserves irrational and hence unjustified beliefs, or because it requires that one hold and maintain an unjustified belief at some future time should certain hypothetical situations occur. If one is an externalist then dogmatism is a vice because it involves holding beliefs that do not track the truth. Additionally, dogmatism complicates the transmission of knowledge via testimony to the extent that one who takes a testifier to be dogmatic will regard his testimony to be unreliable, and the recipient will thus be unable to know what was attested since he will violate the negative coherence condition. This all goes to show that to the extent possible one should strive to avoid dogmatic ways of thinking, believing, and testifying, and that we should guard against even the *appearance* of having a closed mind.