

Evidentialism, Knowledge, and Evidence Possession

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Abstract: Evidentialism has shown itself to be an important research program in contemporary epistemology, with evidentialists giving theories of virtually every important topic in epistemology. Nevertheless, at the heart of evidentialism is a handful of concepts, namely evidence, evidence possession, and evidential fit. If evidentialists cannot give us a plausible account of these concepts, then their research program, with all its various theories, will be in serious trouble. In this paper, I argue that evidentialism has yet to give a plausible account of evidence possession and the prospects for doing so are dim.

Key Words: Evidentialism; Evidence Possession; Knowledge; Richard Feldman; Earl Conee; Kevin McCain

In 1985, Earl Conee and Richard Feldman brought evidentialism into the limelight. At the core of their view was the following account of justification:²

(EJ): An agent's doxastic attitude—belief, disbelief, suspended belief—towards a proposition p at a time t is justified if and only if having that doxastic attitude towards p fits the evidence the agent has (or possesses) at that time. (Cf. Conee and Feldman (1985: 83))

Since then, evidentialism has been applied to many other issues, including the internalism/externalism debate (Conee and Feldman (2001)), skepticism (Feldman (2003), Feldman and Conee (2004)), epistemic value (Feldman (2000, 2006)), epistemic norms (Feldman (2000, 2006), Dougherty (2014a)), defeaters (Feldman (2005), Dougherty (2011a)), religious epistemology (Dougherty (2014b)), and the epistemology of memory (Conee and Feldman (2008), Frise (2015)) among other things. Though evidentialism was initially offered as a theory of justified doxastic attitudes, it has become a research program.

At the center of this research program are a few key concepts: evidence, evidence possession, and evidential fit. Unfortunately, evidentialists have been less concerned with giving theories of these key concepts, perhaps because they think a positive feature of their theory is that it allows for different ways of spelling them out.³ But without accounts of these key concepts, evidentialism offers us not a *theory* but a *theory schema*.⁴ Fortunately, evidentialists

¹ For helpful feedback and comments, I thank Jordi Cat, Dave Fisher, Hao Hong, Mark Kaplan, Tufan Kiyamaz, Tim Leisz, Adam Leite, Kevin McCain, Nick Montgomery, Timothy O'Connor, Luis Oliveira, Harrison Waldo as well as an audience at Indiana University and the 2015 Indiana Philosophical Association.

² This is an account of propositional justification. Conee and Feldman also develop a theory of "well-founded belief" which requires propositional justification and some additional conditions (see (1985: 93-101)). What they call well-founded belief is closely related to what is sometimes called "doxastic justification." In this paper, I will only be concerned with propositional justification.

³ Conee and Feldman (2001; 2008: 89) suggest this explicitly.

⁴ Or, for those sympathetic to the position, a "platitude" in desperate need of explication; cf. Dougherty (2011b).

Richard Feldman and Kevin McCain have provided accounts of these concepts. Their accounts are interesting in their own right. But they are also of crucial importance for the success of evidentialism *qua* research program.

This paper critically evaluates those accounts, specifically their accounts of evidence possession. I begin, in section I, by reviewing Feldman's account of evidence and evidence possession. I argue that Feldman's account is much too restrictive to support the amount of knowledge humans possess. In section II, I review McCain's views of evidence and evidence possession. Like me, McCain finds Feldman's account too restrictive and aims for a moderate account. Nevertheless, in section III, I argue that McCain's account is open to several counterexamples and some natural ways of amending his account have counterexamples as well.

But first a methodological remark. Evidentialism began as an account of *justification*. But several philosophers—including William Alston (2005), Alvin Plantinga (1990), and Richard Swinburne (2001)—have worried that the term 'justification' does not pick out a single property, and thus there is no single property to give an account of. Though evidentialists do not necessarily fully embrace this conclusion, they do periodically defend their position by claiming that critics have misidentified the concept of justification at the heart of (EJ).⁵ Consequentially, counterexamples to (EJ) that turn on intuitions about whether a belief is "justified" or not are open to the criticism that the counterexamples turn on the wrong concept of justification. Fortunately, this is not the only way to give counterexamples to (EJ). For evidentialists usually insist that the kind of justification that (EJ) is about is the kind of justification that is necessary for knowledge; that is, evidentialists accept the following principle:

(KJ): A subject *S* knows that *p* at *t* only if *S*'s belief that *p* at *t* is justified. (Cf. Conee (1992: 242), Conee and Feldman (2001: 54), Conee and Feldman (2008: 83 fn. 1), Feldman (2003), McCain (2015), Dougherty (2014: 159)).

Consequently, in this paper, I will focus on whether evidentialists have provided a plausible account of a necessary condition for knowledge. By using examples that turn on cases of knowledge, not justification, we can bypass worries about identifying the wrong concept of justification.

I. Feldman on Evidence and Evidence Possession

According to Feldman, the evidence one possesses at a time is that subset of one's "total possible evidence" that meets the constraints of being both "available and acceptable." One's total possible evidence is all and only the information the person has "stored in his mind" (1988: 226). This "storage" is meant to be quite inclusive, including both beliefs and experiences as well as both mental states one is currently thinking about and those one is not (1988: 225-6; 1995: 112).⁶ Regarding the two constraints, Feldman spends almost no time on being "acceptable" except to say that the "acceptability" at issue is being *epistemically* acceptable and to criticize a simple account of it (1988: 226-7). Consequently, I'll set it aside. Regarding availability, Feldman argues that *S* has *p* available as evidence at *t* if and only if "*S* is currently

⁵ Thus, Conee and Feldman (2001: 61-3) claim in response to Plantinga that they are not working with a deontic conception of justification; Conee and Feldman (2004b: 103) claim in response to Fantl and McGrath that they do *not* use the phrase 'justified in believing *p*' as to imply that a subject has evidence sufficient for knowing *p*; Conee (2004: 254-5) claims that there is a kind of epistemic justification that does not require evidence, but it is different from the kind of epistemic justification at the heart of (EJ); finally, Feldman (2013: 348) claims in response to Greco that the kind of epistemic justification he is interested in is not only different from justification understood as blameless believing but does not even require blameless believing.

⁶ According to Conee and Feldman (2008: 87-88), experiences are "ultimate" evidence and beliefs "intermediate" evidence, but both are evidence.

thinking of p ” (1988: 232-41).⁷ Since the evidence one possesses is the subset of total possible evidence available to one, for Feldman, the evidence one possesses at a time are those beliefs and non-belief states one is currently thinking about. Letting ‘occurrent mental states’ stand for the mental states (beliefs or otherwise) that one is thinking about, Feldman endorses:

Narrow View (NV): The evidence a subject S possesses at time t is the occurrent mental states S has at t .

(NV) is a highly restrictive theory of evidence possession. Consequently, there are many counterexamples to Feldman’s view from cases of knowledge.⁸ After all, I know many things. For instance, I know that I’m a resident of China; that I am a brother; that I am more than 18 years of age; that the semester has just begun; that logical implication is transitive; etc. But perhaps just as obviously, I know these things even if I’m not currently thinking about them, when for instance I’m in a dreamless sleep or I’m awake, but my attention is concerned with something other than those particular beliefs and evidence I may have for them. Thus, by (KJ), those beliefs are justified even while I sleep or my attention is otherwise preoccupied. But by (EJ) and (NV) it follows that those beliefs fit the occurrent mental states I have at those times. But clearly that, in general, will be false. Most of my beliefs, including the ones mentioned above, do not fit the occurrent mental states I have at any given time. Thus, most of the time most of my beliefs will not constitute knowledge. But that is an absurd result. Feldman’s view, while falling short of skepticism about knowledge and justification, comes too close to it.

In response to these kinds of cases, Feldman might claim that there are occurrent and dispositional senses of ‘knows’ and cognates (cf. Feldman (1988: 237), Conee and Feldman (2001: 67-8)). Thus, when not considering the evidence I have for the proposition (e.g.) that I am a Chinese resident I might still be said to “dispositionally know” that. Even without fussing over what exact account of “dispositional knowledge” to give, we can see that there are two problems with this proposal.

First, this response rests on their being a distinction between a dispositional and occurrent sense of ‘knows.’ But there is no independent reason for thinking there is such a distinction. Indeed, there is reason for doubting that there is such a distinction. For our ordinary practice of attributing knowledge is usually insensitive to facts about the experiences of others at the time of attribution. Learning what experiences a person was (or wasn’t) undergoing at t , after having attributed knowledge that p to her at t , does not usually result in a change or modification of our attribution of knowledge.⁹ That’s certainly not what we should expect if there were such a distinction.

Second, even granting the distinction, this response faces a dilemma. Either dispositionally knowing something implies knowing it or it does not. If it does not imply knowing, then this is not a response at all, it merely gives a label to the problem. For, on it, it still comes out that I

⁷ At (1988: 240), Feldman suggest that for some propositions one can be currently thinking of them “non consciously.” I’m not sure that’s possible, but as Feldman does not stress it, I don’t take it to be an important suggestion.

⁸ The counterexamples here are similar to ones given by Goldman (1999: 278). But Goldman deploys them against an “accessibilism” position that is not logically equivalent to Feldman’s.

⁹ The only exception I can think of concerns the acquisition of knowledge. We sometimes attribute knowledge to a person at a time because we believe the person had an experience at that time that is responsible for them acquiring the knowledge we attribute to them. If we learned they did not have that experience, we would retract our attribution of knowledge. But clearly this exception does not help Feldman. After all, even in this kind of case, we do not go from attributing one kind of knowledge to another, but from attributing knowledge to ignorance. Worse yet, the problem cases for Feldman do not concern acquiring knowledge, but knowledge already possessed.

usually do not know that (e.g.) I am a Chinese resident. Suppose, by contrast, dispositionally knowing something implies knowing it. On this response, then, knowledge is bifurcated: S knows that p if and only if S either occurrently knows that p or dispositionally knows that p . But this horn of the lemma requires a rejection of (KJ). After all, since most of the time most of my beliefs do not fit the evidence I possess that is given by my occurrent experiences, it follows by (EJ) that most of the time most of my beliefs are unjustified. But, nonetheless, many of those unjustified beliefs constitute knowledge, namely, dispositional knowledge. Since this horn requires the rejection of (KJ) it is safe to assume most evidentialists would not prefer it.

In the face of these difficulties, Feldman seems most inclined to bite the bullet, and embrace a kind of (moderate) skepticism (cf. (1988: 237)). But there's no reason to bite the bullet here; it is much more likely that we've simply taken a wrong turn somewhere, presumably at Feldman's overly restrictive account of evidence possession.

II. McCain's Moderate View

Like me, McCain finds Feldman's theory of evidence possession to be overly restrictive and implausible.¹⁰ McCain aims to provide a more moderate position. McCain distinguishes two camps on the ontology of evidence. According to *Psychologism*, evidence only consists of psychological items, specifically, one's non-factive mental states (2014: 10 fn. 5). (Non-factive mental states are representational mental states that "one can be in even if they misrepresent the word" (2014: 10)). According to *Anti-Psychologism*, evidence only consists of non-psychological items (2014: 10).¹¹ Among the latter camp, McCain draws a further distinction. According to *Propositionalism*, evidence only consists of propositions. (McCain assumes that propositions are non-psychological items (2014: 21).) Finally, a sub camp of *Propositionalism* is *Factive-p*: evidence only consists of true propositions (2014: 10-11).¹²

McCain argues against *Factive-p*. Beyond that, he is neutral with regard to *Psychologism* and *Propositionalism*. He recognizes that the two positions offer incompatible ontologies for evidence but "the disagreement does not lead to significant epistemic differences" (2014: 27). McCain's point seems plausible when it comes to the issue of evidence possession. For instance, on *Psychologism*, the evidence I possess might be my mental state of believing that p ; but on *Propositionalism*, the evidence is the proposition p , and the reason why I possess it is because I stand in the "believing" relation to it. Such a difference does not seem so grand. However, for easy of exposition, in what follows I'll frequently write as if it is mental states that provide evidence and not the propositional content of those mental states.

Regarding evidence possession, whereas Feldman thought of it as a two-place relation between a person and a body of evidence, McCain suggest that it should be thought of as a three place relation between a person, a body of evidence, and a proposition (2014: 49-50). As he sees it, one doesn't just "have" evidence; one has evidence for/against a proposition. Regarding the accessibility of evidence, McCain considers the position that the evidence one possesses is one's total possible evidence, i.e. *any* information stored in one's mind. Let's call that view:

¹⁰ Conee also seems sympathetic to a more moderate view, but does not develop one in the detailed way McCain does.

¹¹ Notice that, so defined, while *Psychologism* and *Anti-Psychologism* are mutually exclusively, they are not mutually exhaustive.

¹² McCain identifies another position he calls *Non-Factive_p* according to which "evidence consists only of propositions, but those propositions can be true or false" (2014: 11). However, *Propositionalism* and *Non-Factive_p* would seem to differ only if there could be propositions which were not true or false, in which case *Propositionalism* would allow them to be evidence, and *Non-Factive_p* would not. As McCain never really discusses this possibility, I take it that there's not really an important difference between *Propositionalism* and *Non-Factive_p*.

Wide View (WV): The evidence a subject S possesses at time t is any and all information stored by S at t.

McCain, following Feldman, rejects (WV) as too permissive. He gives the following counterexample:

DEEP MEMORY: Sara is a normal adult in her thirties. Sara has many memories of her childhood that she can recall. Some of these memories she can easily recall and some she can only recall with prompting of specific kinds. One particular memory, that it was raining on the third day of March when Sara was three years old, is very deeply stored. Sara could only bring this memory to consciousness with years of training and psychological therapy. At *t* Sara has not undergone any of the training or psychological therapy. (McCain (2014: 35), cf. Feldman (1988: 228-9)).

McCain thinks it is implausible that Sara's memory is evidence that she possesses. For if it were, then she would be justified in believing that it was raining on that day; but intuitively she is not. Consequently, the evidence one has cannot be one's *total possible evidence*; (WV) is false.

McCain aims for a moderate account that is more inclusive than Feldman's narrow account but not as permissible as the wide account. To that end, he proposes:

Moderate View (MV): S has *p* available as evidence relevant to *q* at *t* iff at *t* S is currently aware of *p* or S is disposed to bring *p* to mind when reflecting on the question of *q*'s truth. (2014:51).

Given McCain's neutral attitude between *Psychologism* and *Propositionalism*, his *p* can range over either non-factive mental states (per *Psychologism*) or the propositional content of those non-factive mental states (per *Propositionalism*) though not both. Since my criticisms of McCain focus mainly on evidence possession, I'll ignore this complication.

Now strictly speaking (MV) is an account of *available* evidence and not evidence *possession*. But McCain, following Feldman, holds that the evidence one possess is that subset of one's total evidence that is both available and "epistemically acceptable" (2014: 34). However, McCain rarely touches on this second condition, and his informal gloss on it seems to amount to little more than that there be no counterexamples to the theory of evidence possession. Consequently, in describing McCain's view, I'll follow his lead and freely move between talk of available evidence and evidence possession.

III. Problems with McCain's Account

McCain's view of evidence possession can handle some counterexamples to Feldman's account. For it allows beliefs I am not currently thinking of to be part of the evidence I possess; consequently those beliefs can strongly support other beliefs like (e.g.) I am a Chinese resident or I'm not 18 years old. Nevertheless, McCain's view is still inadequate. I'll argue that there are counterexamples both to it and natural ways of revising it.

First, there are counterexamples to McCain's view because it ties evidence possession too closely to one's dispositions and what a person is disposed to think of when that person considers the truth of a proposition need not be the evidence that person possesses. Consider:

RAY. Ray is a racist, who is nevertheless a leading scholar on cognitive development in children. Ray has always thought that members of a certain race were none too bright. Early in his career, Ray has performed and published numerous studies which conclusively support the conclusion that children of a certain race develop more slowly than others on certain skills. Ray remembers those studies, and can summarize his findings if requested. Nevertheless, Ray

himself rarely thinks about his studies. Further, when he reflects as to why children of a certain race develop more slowly than others, he is almost never disposed to consider his studies but rather his racist reasons for the belief.

Because Ray is not disposed to bring to mind his studies when he thinks about their conclusions, by (MV), his memories of his studies are not part of his evidence for their conclusions. But that is very unintuitive. Ray, after all, has done numerous studies and could, if asked, summarize them. Further, it would be entirely appropriate to use Ray as (say) an expert witness at a trial not only because of his status as a leading scholar but also because, it seems, he has such excellent evidence for the conclusions of his studies that he could provide for a jury. Of course, it may be that Ray is not justified in believing his conclusions; perhaps the fact that his beliefs are casually sustained by poor reasons is sufficient for his beliefs in the conclusion of his studies to be unjustified.¹³ But that is consistent with my point that Ray's memories of his studies are part of his evidence for those conclusions; they should not be demoted out of his possessed evidence for those conclusions just because he isn't disposed to bring them to mind when considering those conclusions.

While Ray is able to bring to mind his studies, he isn't disposed to. This suggests we offer a weaker account than McCain's official one as follows:

(MV*): S has *p* available as evidence relevant to *q* at *t* iff at *t* S is currently aware of *p* or S has the ability to reflect on the question of *q*'s truth and bring *p* to mind when so reflecting.

(MV*) avoids the problem of RAY. Further, it remains a *moderate* view, as it includes among one's evidence more than one's occurrent mental states but does not include Sara's inaccessible memory in DEEP MEMORY because she is unable to bring it to mind. Indeed, (MV*) is even suggested by some of McCain's informal remarks, such as "...stored information is available as evidence on a particular topic when S can recall this information by reflecting on the topic" (2014: 50).

The problem with (MV*) is that it over-intellectualizes evidence possession because some cognizers—including animals, small children, and mentally handicapped adults—have non-occurrent beliefs that constitute knowledge but lack the ability to willfully reflect on the truth of their beliefs. Consider:

HAL: Due to various mental handicaps, Hal's attention span is extremely small and he is unable to reflect or otherwise follow a line or train of thought. Hal believes that his sister Monique lives in Nashville. He's visited her house many times and has many memories of his visits. If asked where she lives, he will consistently (i) bring to mind those memories and (ii) respond that she lives in Nashville. At time *t*, though, Hal is thinking about something else.

At *t*, Hal is unable to reflect on the truth of his belief. By (MV*), the only non-occurrent mental states that are part of Hal's evidence for his belief are those that he'd bring to mind upon reflecting. Thus, by (MV*), it follows that none of his non-occurrent mental states—including his memories—are part of his evidence for his belief about where his sister lives. That is an implausible result. But things are worse. Given (MV*), the only evidence Hal has for where his sister lives is his occurrent mental states. But since they do not concern his belief about where his sister lives, his belief that his sister lives in Nashville does not fit the evidence he has at *t*. By

¹³ Or, for those who like the distinction between "propositional" and "doxastic" justification/well-founded belief, perhaps Ray's beliefs are propositionally justified, but not doxastically justified/well-founded.

(EJ), it follows that the belief is not justified at t , and by (KJ) that he does not know it. But intuitively Hal does know where his sister lives at t . For these reasons (MV*) should be rejected.

That counterexample shows that the possession of evidence should not be tied too closely to a cognizer's ability to reflect, on their own volition, about the truth of a belief. Thus, we might try weakening (MV*) to get:

(MV**): S has p available as evidence relevant to q at t iff at t S is currently aware of p or if S's attention were directed to q , then S would be able to bring p to mind.

(MV**) is immune from cases like HAL. For even if Hal is unable to, on his own, direct his attention to a proposition, it does not follow that his attention could not be so directed. And all that the second disjunct in (MV**) requires is that *were* Hal's attention directed to the relevant proposition (e.g. "my sister lives in Nashville") *then* Hal has the ability to bring his memories to mind, which of course he does. (MV**) also handles RAY. For if Ray's attention were directed to the relevant proposition, he is able to bring to mind his studies, even if he's not disposed to. Finally, (MV**) is a moderate position because it excludes Sara's specific memory in DEEP MEMORY as being part of her possessed evidence because she lacks the ability to bring it to mind.

However, there are counterexamples to (MV**). These counterexamples involve what I'll call *evidentially isolated basic beliefs*. A basic belief is, roughly, a belief that constitutes knowledge independent of its positive epistemic relations to other beliefs.¹⁴ S's belief that p at t is an evidentially isolated belief just when there are no other non-factive mental state (or states) m such that (A) S has m at t , and (B) m supports p such that given just m believing p is the doxastic attitude that "fits." Now from the mere fact that a belief is a basic belief it does not necessarily follow that it is also evidentially isolated. Even if (e.g.) I can know that p in a basic way because you testified that p , it may also be the case that I have other beliefs that support p or beliefs that support that *if* you were to testify that p , then p is very likely to be true.¹⁵ However, an evidentially isolated basic belief would be a belief that is both a basic belief and also evidentially isolated. More formally: S's belief that b is an evidentially isolated basic belief at time t if and only if (i) b is a basic belief at t and (ii) there are no other non-factive mental state (or states) m such that (A) S has m at t , (B) m supports p such that given just m believing p is the doxastic attitude that "fits."

Evidentially isolated basic beliefs, so defined, would provide counterexamples to (MV**). Suppose at time t S's belief that b is an isolated basic belief. By definition, at t S's belief that b constitutes knowledge. From (KJ), it follows that at t S's belief that b is justified. From (EJ), it follows that at t S's belief that b fits the evidence that S possesses at t . And, from (EJ) and (MV**), it follows that (1) there is some mental state (or states) m such that S is currently aware of m or if S's attention were directed to b , then S would bring m to mind, and (2) given m believing b is that doxastic attitude that "fits". But, by definition of b being an isolated basic belief, (1) and (2) do not hold. For, by definition, S does not have any mental states s such that given s believing p is the doxastic attitude that fits. Thus, S does not have any mental state s such that S is current aware of s or if S attention were direct to b then S would bring s to mind which is also such that given s believing b is the doxastic attitude that fits. Thus, given the existence of

¹⁴ Sometimes (e.g. Plantinga (1993)) these are called "properly basic beliefs." There are several well-known defenses of the existence of basic beliefs in the literature.

¹⁵ Of course, not everyone agrees that testimony is a basic source of knowledge. See Lackey (2008) or Fricker (1994) for a criticism of that position. I discuss Lackey's argument in Perrine (2014).

evidentially isolated basic beliefs, as well as the principles (KJ) and (EJ), there are counterexamples to (MV**). The interesting question is thus whether there are any evidentially isolated basic beliefs.

It is plausible that there are. Consider the following two cases.

BIRD WATCHER. While hiking in a mountain range, Emmett an expert bird watcher sees what might be a rare bird up ahead. After positioning himself with a clear view of the bird, he immediately identifies it as a male goldfinch—a bird he has seen many times, but is not known to be in this mountain range. Upon the basis of his visual experience, he immediately forms the belief that there is a male goldfinch in the woods. Pleased with his observation, and tired from his hike on the mountain range, Emmett returns to his camp where he takes a nap.

LOGIC. While reading ahead in her logic textbook, Sidra considers for the first time whether the conjunction elimination rule in her logic textbook is sound. It seems overwhelming obvious to her that it must be sound, and she comes to believe that it is. After completing her homework, she plays a serious game of volleyball with some of her friends.¹⁶

While he sleeps, Emmett's belief that he saw a male goldfinch in the woods is an evidentially isolated basic belief. Presumably, it not only constitutes knowledge while Emmett sleeps but is known in a basic way. Does Emmett have any other mental states while he sleeps that could be possessed evidence for his belief that he saw a male goldfinch in the woods? Clearly, whatever occurrent mental states Emmett has while he sleeps do not support that belief. Thus, given (MV**), if Emmett has any evidence for his belief while he sleeps it must be other mental states that he has (non-occurrently) while he sleeps that he would bring to mind, were his mind directed to the proposition that he saw a male goldfinch in the woods that day. But it is doubtful that Emmett has such other mental states.¹⁷ After all, Emmett does not antecedently believe that there are goldfinches in this forest; after all, he knows that goldfinches do not generally inhabit this mountain range. And it is hard to see that there are other beliefs Emmett formed when he formed the belief that he saw a male goldfinch in the woods that would support that belief to such a degree that they would make such a belief justified on their own. Thus, given (MV**), while he sleeps, Emmett does not have evidence for his belief and, thus, from (EJ) and (KJ) he does not know that he saw a male goldfinch in the woods, despite what is most intuitive.

Similar points apply to Sidra's belief that conjunction elimination is sound while she plays volleyball with her friends. That belief is presumably a basic belief. It is also an evidentially isolated basic belief. Though Sidra is having occurrent experiences as she plays volleyball, clearly none of them are evidence for the belief that conjunction elimination is sound. Thus, given (MV**), if she has any evidence for her belief while she plays volleyball, it must be other mental states that she has (non-occurrently) while she is playing that she would bring to mind, were her mind directed to the proposition that conjunction elimination is sound. But it is doubtful that she has other such beliefs. (Sidra is, after all, a student not a logic professor.) Thus, given

¹⁶ This case is modelled on one given in Moon (2012). Moon criticizes a logically distinct and stronger position than me: that S's knowledge that *p* requires S believes that *p* on the basis of evidence, E, and further, S can be aware of that evidence E by way of introspection at *t*. My criticisms of evidentialism have not relied upon claims about based evidence or introspection. Further, Moon does not bring out what I take to be most important in these examples: that the basic beliefs are *evidentially isolated*; in fact, if we add to his case that the belief is not evidentially isolated, his counterexample would fail. Thus, I take my discussion to extend, if not supplant, his.

¹⁷ Or that we must understand the example in this way.

(MV**), while she plays volleyball, Sidra does not have any evidence for her belief and thus, from (EJ) and (KJ), she does not know that conjunction elimination is sound, despite what is most intuitive.

In response, McCain might claim that Emmett does have evidence: namely a “disposition to recollect” that there is a male goldfinch in the forest, where a disposition to recollect something is “a disposition to bring to mind the proposition as known.”¹⁸ But this response is unsuccessful. Here is a dilemma argument against it. Either a disposition to bring to mind the proposition as known is (i) a non-occurrent belief that Emmett has while he sleeps that states that he knows that he saw a goldfinch in woods that day or (ii) it is a disposition to form such a belief that has yet to manifest. If (i), then that non-occurrent belief may very well be evidence that Emmett has for his belief. But there’s no reason to think that Emmett has formed that belief or that he must. For such a belief is actually a higher-order belief—a belief about another belief—and there’s no reason to suppose that when we form simple perceptual beliefs we also thereby form higher-order beliefs about those simple perceptual beliefs. If (ii), then it may be plausible that Emmett has the relevant disposition. However, the relevant disposition is not evidence because it is not a representation of the world,¹⁹ but (at best) a disposition to represent the world. But if it is not a representation, then it can’t be a non-factive mental state or the propositional content of a non-factive mental state, since those are representations. But given that McCain is committed to *Psychologism* or *Propositionalism*, it follows that a disposition to recollect, so understood, couldn’t be evidence. So either Emmett lacks the mental state that could be evidence or has a disposition that couldn’t be evidence. Either way, Emmett does not have evidence while he sleeps.

Here is related objection. It may be that cognizers like Emmett and Sidra have various dispositions such that were those disposition to manifest they would provide mental states that could serve as evidence for Emmett’s and Sidra’s beliefs. For instance, on some views, if it seems to you that p , then you thereby have evidence that p . Further, if Sidra and Emmett were to reflect on their beliefs, perhaps it would seem to them that, respectively, Emmett saw a goldfinch in the woods that day and conjunction elimination is a sound rule. However, these points even if true do not undermine my argument. For even if Emmett and Sidra could acquire evidence by reflecting and manifesting various dispositions, they do not yet have that evidence for they have yet to do the relevant reflecting. Thus, they do not yet possess the evidence that they might acquire through such reflecting. Further, the disposition to form something with propositional content that could be evidence does not itself have propositional content. (Compare: a disposition to yell is not air vibrations but, when manifested, does produce air vibrations.) So the dispositions themselves do not count as evidence that Emmett has while he naps or Sidra possesses while she plays volleyball.

We can generalize the points of the previous paragraphs as follows. I’ve already shown that given the existence of evidentially isolated beliefs, as well as (KJ) and (EJ), it follows that (MV**) is false. Thus, for these responses to undermine my argument they must show that these kinds of cases could not be understood as cases of evidentially isolated basic beliefs. The most promising way to do that is to show that Emmett’s and Sidra’s beliefs are not evidentially

¹⁸ McCain (2015), McCain is quoting Conee and Feldman (2011: 304). McCain (2015) gives this response to Moon (2012).

¹⁹ McCain (2014: 11) lists what he considers the relevant kind of non-factive mental states, but they constitute beliefs, experiences and “perhaps others such as intuitions and rational insights.” He does not include dispositions nor should he.

isolated. To show that their beliefs are not evidentially isolated, one must identify some mental state (or states) that (A) they have at the relevant time but also (B) support the relevant belief so that given just that mental state the relevant doxastic attitude that fits is belief. The problem with these attempts is that they fail to find a mental state that satisfies both (A) and (B). Some mental states—like non-occurrent beliefs or occurrent experiences like seemings—may satisfy (B), but there is no reason for assuming that (A) must also be met in these cases for those mental states. Some dispositions to form mental states meet (A) in these cases but there is no reason for thinking that (B) is met with regard to them.

To be sure, this criticism of (MV**) requires not just the existence of basic beliefs but the existence of evidentially isolated basic beliefs. But that does not strike me as overly objectionable. For it is plausible that people do have evidentially isolated basic beliefs. I've given two plausible examples of such beliefs—one concerning a past event, one concerning a simple logical truth. But even if one is not convinced by those particular examples, it is plausible that at least some of the things we know about past events and simple logical truths are evidentially isolated basic beliefs.²⁰

The problem of evidentially isolated basic beliefs is different from the objection of forgotten evidence that is periodically pressed against evidentialism.²¹ Consider two cognizers, Sally and Sid. Both Sally and Sid form the same belief, say, broccoli has health benefits. But Sally forms this belief on the basis of another belief that is good evidence for it, say, that a New York Times science article reports as much. By contrast, Sid forms this belief on the basis of another belief that is not good evidence for it, say, that a National Enquirer article reports as much. Finally, suppose at a later time, both forget their evidence, i.e. their beliefs about the New York Times and National Enquirer, but do not acquire any new evidence for these beliefs. Intuitively, this objection goes, Sally is justified in her belief, even though she has forgotten her evidence. By contrast, Sid is not justified in his belief, even if he mistakenly believes that he did form the belief in an epistemically appropriate way. But, then, at this later time, it is not just the evidence that Sally and Sid possess at that time that is relevant to the justification of their beliefs, as (EJ) would have. Rather, the evidential strength of the beliefs they initially had and used to acquire the belief are also relevant, even though they have since forgotten that evidence; as Goldman put it once, “earlier evidence is also relevant to justifiedness.”²² So, the objection goes, (EJ) is false.

My objection is distinct from that objection. Specifically, that objection claims that the evidential strength of the beliefs one uses to acquire a belief are relevant to the justificatory status of the acquired belief, even if one forgets one's initial evidence. But my criticism does not turn on this claim. Indeed, I can concede that for any non-basic belief, that belief is justified at a time if and only if that belief fits the evidential strength of other beliefs that person has at that

²⁰ Might the evidentialist eschew basic beliefs altogether, urging instead a kind of coherentism about justification? In response, even if an appeal to coherentism would deliver sufficient justification for knowledge about simple logical truths and past events, my criticism would still show something noteworthy: that evidentialism must be developed as to take a side on the foundationalism/coherentism/infinetism dispute. But I doubt that coherentism will save the evidentialist from the problem of evidentially isolated beliefs. For coherentist usually require that a belief cohere with a set of beliefs, where “cohere” means more than logical consistence but includes things like probabilistic consistent and explanatory relevance (cf. BonJour (1985)). But if a belief really is evidentially isolated, then it is doubtful it will “cohere” in this sense with other beliefs and thus could be justified by cohering with other beliefs.

²¹ See Goldman (1999) for an influential presentation, which I follow. See also Greco (1990: 256-8) for a case similar to Goldman's.

²² Goldman (2011: 267).

time. If a person formed a non-basic belief on the basis of good evidence, but at a later time forgot that good evidence and acquired no new beliefs that were equally good or better evidence as the old beliefs, then at the subsequent time the person's belief is not justified. Those concessions are consistent with what is needed for my argument: that there are evidentially isolated basic beliefs.²³

Finally, notice that a retreat to either the narrow view of evidence possession (NV) or the wide view (WV) will not help this problem either. Since (NV) is more restrictive than moderate views like (MV)-(MV**), it cannot help. But (WV) cannot either, despite being a more permissive account. For an evidentially isolated belief is one that, by definition, is isolated from the *rest* of one's beliefs, including the ones that a person cannot access. Thus the problem of evidentially isolated basic beliefs is a serious problem for any of these ways that an evidentialist might develop his account.

IV. Conclusion

Evidentialism is an important research program in contemporary epistemology. At the heart of that research program are a few key concepts: evidence, evidential fit, evidence possession. In this paper, I've argued on the basis of various examples that evidentialists have yet to provide us with a plausible theory of evidence possession. Consequently, the success of their research program is drawn into question until they do so.

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²³ To be sure, one could *develop* the forgotten evidence objection into an objection similar to mine. For instance, one might argue that in LOGIC Sidra's experience as of conjunction elimination being sound was itself very good evidence for believing conjunction elimination is sound and that her belief is a basic one because it was formed on the basis of such evidence. But notice (i) as a matter of fact, neither Goldman nor others do develop the objection this way, and (ii) it would be misleading to speak of this as an objection from forgotten evidence since experiences are not forgotten, beliefs are.

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