

Littlejohn – No Evidence is False

Brian T. Miller

September 20, 2017

§1 – Introduction

Central question: assuming that all evidence is propositional, must all evidence propositions be *true*?

Littlejohn defends:

ET: One's evidence includes p only if p is true

Agenda in this paper: refute arguments for¹

FE: One's evidence can include p even if p is false

Some Preliminary Points:

First, a general problem for defenders of FE:

1. Have to argue against statists (e.g. Turri) that evidence is propositional²
2. Have to argue that some evidence propositions are false

But, best arguments for (1) support ET, not FE (claims Littlejohn)

Second: according to Littlejohn, the goodness or badness of a reason isn't intrinsic to the reason – 'reasons are [only] good or bad when taken as reasons for specific things'. (146).

So, can't say that false propositions are *bad* reasons, since no reason is a bad reason all on its own.

If P is a reason, it's a good reason to believe P or Q, and a bad reason to believe not-P. But considered alone it's neither good nor bad.

BTM: is that plausible? Is it more plausible for normative reasons than for motivating reasons, or vice versa? Is it prejudicial against defenders of FE? What would Turri and other statists say?³

§2 – Justification (I)

Fantl and McGrath defend:

JJ If you are justified in believing p, then p is warranted enough to justify you in performing an action or forming a belief based on p

¹ NB that the falsity of FE doesn't imply that all evidence is *true*, since some (or all) evidence might be neither true nor false.

² We're ignoring mixed views here and assuming that either all evidence is propositional or none is.

³ Turri's paper from last week was published in 2009, and in 2014 Turri and Littlejohn edited a book on epistemic normativity together. Good bet that Littlejohn has Turri in mind when he discusses statism. Also remember that Turri thinks that the possibility of believing for bad reasons is itself a good reason to reject propositionalism.

Argument:

- P1 If you know that p then p is warranted enough to justify.
- P2 Holding fixed knowledge-level justification while subtracting truth and being unGettiered makes no difference to whether p is warranted enough to justify.
- C Thus, if p is knowledge-level justified, p is warranted enough to justify.

Illustrative case:

... It is highly plausible that if two subjects have all the same very strong evidence for *my glass contains gin*, believe that proposition on the basis of this evidence, and then act on the belief in reaching to take a drink, those two subjects are equally justified in their actions and equally justified in treating what they each did as a reason, even if one of them, the unlucky one, has cleverly disguised petrol in his glass rather than gin. Notice that if we asked the unlucky fellow why he did such a thing, he might reply with indignation: 'Well, it was the perfectly rational thing to do; I had every reason to think the glass contained gin; why in the world should I think that someone would be going around putting petrol in cocktail glasses!?' **Here the unlucky subject ... is not providing an excuse for his action or treating what he did as a reason; he is *defending it* as the action that made the most sense for him to do ... He is providing a justification, not an excuse** (Fantl and McGrath 2009: 125; boldface added).

Littlejohn rejects the part in boldface: he thinks the subject offers an excuse, not a justification.

Source of F&M's error: equating *the action that makes most sense for you to do* with *the action that's justified*.

Littlejohn:

- The putative reason in question is the proposition *my glass contains gin*
- that's a *motivating* reason, but not a *normative* reason
- which action 'makes most sense for you to do' is determined by your *motivating* reasons
- which action *is justified* is determined by your *normative* reasons

Argument:

1. JJ: If you are justified in believing p , then p is warranted enough to justify you in performing an action or forming a belief based on p (suppose for reductio)
2. Some normative mistakes (false beliefs about what our reasons require) are reasonable: I might reasonably/ justifiably⁴ believe *I have overall reason do A*, when in reality I have overall reason to do B (where $B \neq A$) (premise)
3. In such a case, I'm justified in performing an action based on *I have overall reason do A* (from 1, 2)
4. So, I'm justified in doing A (from 3)
5. I'm justified in doing B, not A (from 2)
6. Contradiction (4, 5): reject the supposition at 1

⁴ same thing?

BTM: Note that it's essential to Littlejohn's argument that the reasonable belief in question is a higher-order belief: a belief about what one's reasons support (roughly). There's an important disanalogy between epistemology and practical philosophy here. Epistemologists are much more sympathetic to the idea that the normative significance of first-order evidence is highly sensitive to higher-order evidence (= evidence about evidence). Practical philosophers, less so: it doesn't matter if you reasonably believe that torturing the kitten is permissible, what matters to the normative evaluation of your action is that *it isn't*.

F&M could reformulate JJ:

JJ If you are justified in believing p , then p is warranted enough to justify you in ~~performing an action or~~ forming a belief based on p

Then if Littlejohn reformulates the argument in purely epistemic terms, (2) becomes: Some normative mistakes (false beliefs about what our evidence supports) are reasonable:

- 2' I might reasonably/ justifiably believe *my evidence supports A*, when in reality my evidence supports B (where $B \neq A$)

But it's plausible that if you really are justified in believing that your evidence supports A, then your evidence really *does* support A (at least that's more plausible than it's practical analogue), so the argument fails.⁵

⁵ Reading further I see that Littlejohn explicitly considers a purely epistemic version of the principle in §2 and concedes that it avoids the argument from §1.

Alternatively, one could restrict JJ's appropriate p-values to first-order evidence propositions.

Alternatively, one could adopt a kind of normative externalism on which false beliefs about what evidence supports are never justified. For example, it's plausible that one could never be justified in believing *e is good evidence for not-e*; perhaps this generalizes.

End BTM

§2 – Justification (II)

Rizzieri (implicitly) defends:

JJ2 If you justifiably believe p, p is a piece of evidence of yours that can justify further beliefs

Motivating case:

I believe that nobody can enter my office (O for now) because I believe that I have just locked the door (LD for now). Let us stipulate that I have inferred (O) from (LD). I pushed the lock in and gave it a quick twist to the left, which usually does the trick; however, my lock is damaged and does not work. Hence, (LD) is false.

Because I justifiably believe LD, *JJ2* says that p is evidence for me. Because it's false, some evidence is false, in which case ET is false. So *JJ2* and ET are inconsistent⁶

Littlejohn's argument against *JJ2*:

1. That I have just locked my door is evidence that nobody can enter my office.

If p is evidence for q only if the probability of q has to be higher when p is part of your evidence than it would have been otherwise, (1) entails:

2. Because I just locked my door, it is more probable than it would have been otherwise that nobody could get into my office.

The problem is that (2) entails:

3. I just locked my door.

The case is a potential counterexample to ET only if (1) is true and (3) is false, but the argument just sketched shows that (1) entails (3). The objection to ET fails.

⁶ Assuming that it's possible to have a justified, false belief.

Schematically:

(i) p is evidence for q.

We saw that (i) entails (ii) and (iii):

(ii) Because of p, q satisfies C⁷

(iii) So, p is true.

BTM: something fishy here...

The question this: given that p is evidence in support of q, is that in itself sufficient for the truth of p?

First objection: this is supposed to be a question about evidence in particular. But compare:

(i') p entails (p or q).

(ii') Because of p, (p or q) satisfies C⁸

(iii') So, p is true.

Plausibly, if the argument works for *evidential* relations, it works for *entailment* relations. But there are lots of false propositions we could put in place of p in the entailment version of the argument. If the argument fails for entailment, why does it succeed for evidence?

What Littlejohn needs is a disanalogy between the two arguments.

Possible disanalogy: there's something special about *because* relations: nothing can be the case *because* of a false proposition. This is promising, but it would require a lot more argument (or citation).⁹

Second objection: Turri argued that evidence doesn't exist independent of agents – it's always *someone's* evidence. That suggests that (i) is, at best, a shorthand expression of something like:

(i'') p is (part of) S's evidence for q

But *that* certainly doesn't imply (ii) or (iii). It does imply

(ii'') Because p is part of S's evidence, q satisfies ¹⁰

But now, even if we grant that nothing is the case because of a falsehood, we still don't get

(iii) p is true

⁷ NB: it's not important that we understand p raising the probability for q as a necessary condition of p being evidence for q. What's important is that there's some property that q has in virtue of p being evidence for it; here that property is replaced by variable C.

⁸ Let C be the property *is a logical consequence of some proposition*.

⁹ I see on p. 155 that Littlejohn asserts the factivity of 'because', so presumably this 'possible disanalogy' would play a role in his response.

¹⁰ Where *q satisfies C* might be *S's confidence in q is raised*, or *S is rational in believing q*, etc.

we get

(iii) *p* is part of *S*'s evidence is true

which for all we've seen is perfectly consistent with *p* being false.

End BTM

§3 – Knowledge

Case from Arnold:

Meeting Time: I have a 7 pm meeting, and extreme (and justified) confidence in my fancy watch's perfect accuracy. I make inferences from what my watch says only if I have extreme confidence that it is perfectly accurate (perhaps I have exacting standards for what constitutes a good watch). Having lost track of the time and wanting to arrive on time for the meeting, I look carefully at my watch. Because I have such extreme confidence in my watch's accuracy, I reason: 'It's exactly 2:58 pm; therefore I am not late for my 7 pm meeting'. Again I know my conclusion, but as it happens it's exactly 2:56 pm, not 2:58 pm (Warfield 2005: 408; Arnold forthcoming: 2).

Here I come to know *I'm not late for my 7 pm meeting* on the basis of evidence proposition *it's exactly 2:58 pm*, which is false: it's actually 2:56.¹¹

Arnold asserts:

EBI-E If *S* knows *p* epistemically based on inference from *x* the *S*'s evidence includes *x*

Argument:

1. In Meeting Time, Tom knows inferentially that he is not late for the meeting.
2. If Tom knows inferentially that he is not late for the meeting, he knows this based on an inference from the false proposition that it is exactly 2:58.
3. Thus, Tom knows based on an inference from a false proposition that it is exactly 2:58.
4. If Tom knows this based on an inference from the false proposition that it is exactly 2:58, Tom's evidence includes the false proposition that it is exactly 2:58.

¹¹ NB that this resembles Gettier cases, which often involve believing true conclusions on the basis of false premises/evidence. In those cases the subject doesn't know, but here we're asked to judge that I do know. What's the relevant difference?

5. Thus, Tom's evidence includes the false proposition that it is exactly 2:58.

Littlejohn finds the argument fairly persuasive:

While I share some of his intuitions about Meeting Time, I have to say that my confidence that Meeting Time is a case of knowledge from falsehood is much higher than my confidence in the conjunctive proposition that this is a case of knowledge from falsehood, and could only be such if (P₃) is true. (154)

In particular, he's worried about (2) and (3).

(BTM: really? Isn't (2) a stipulation?: '...I reason 'it's exactly 2:58; therefore I am not late...' And (3) is certainly the most natural of the case; are we to believe that you reason to the conclusion but you don't believe the conclusion on the evidence? That's possible, but isn't it possible as Arnold means it too? Arnold just needs one counterexample to ET...)

First objection: the linguistic evidence speaks against the combination of (1) and (2), which might lead us to say:

- 4 Tom has a reason to believe that he will not be late, which is that it is 2:58. But, he doesn't know that it's 2:58 because it's not true that it's 2:58.
- 5 . I know that it's not 2:58, but Tom has a reason to believe that he will not be late, which is that it is 2:58.
- 6 There is indeed a reason for Tom to believe that he's not late, which is that it is 2:58. Of course, it's not 2:58. He only thinks that because his watch is mistaken.

But 4, 5, and 6 are contradictory!

Signpost: Littlejohn now proceeds to argue directly for ET

First reason to accept ET: sometimes the very same reason is a reason to act and a reason to believe. Example: *the stuff in the bottle is gin* is a reason to believe *mixing this stuff with tonic would be delicious*, and also a reason to mix it with tonic and drink it. But:

If the propositions that constitute reasons to believe constitute reasons to act, then because reasons for action are favorers and only facts favor, it seems that only facts are fit to be reasons to believe. If false propositions were reasons to believe or reasons to act, they could not figure in explanatory claims like [the one above]. (156)

Second reason to accept ET: if some evidence propositions are false, then it's possible that your total evidence will be inconsistent. In that case

- the probability of any hypothesis on your evidence ($P(h|e)$) is undefined.
- if $P(h|e)$ is undefined, then it's never the case that $P(h|e) > P(h)$, so (plausibly) inconsistent bodies of evidence don't support any hypotheses

Upshot:

If Meeting Time and Santa are cases in which we have inferential knowledge from false evidence, these cases show that our evidence can support hypotheses even when the evidential probability of these hypotheses is undefined. If, however, evidence can only justify when it raises the probability of that the propositions we believe are correct, EBI-E is mistaken. (157)

Signpost: Littlejohn (tentatively) agrees with Arnold that it's possible to obtain knowledge from falsehood, but denies that instantiations of this possibility are due to inferences from false propositions.

Alternative hypothesis:

It is a surprising fact that you can sometimes treat something that is not evidence as if it is evidence for what you believe and thereby acquire knowledge. It is surprising that knowledge from falsehood is possible. Surprising facts call out for explanation. Here is a suggestion. Sometimes, treating q as if it is evidence in coming to believe p is a way of safely believing p even if q is false (i.e., there are no nearby worlds in which you treat q as if it is a reason to believe p in which you thereby come to falsely believe p). Sometimes when you come to safely believe p by treating q as if it is evidence, q is not actually evidence. If treating something as if it is evidence in coming to believe p will be a way of safely believing p , perhaps treating something as if it is evidence is a way of acquiring knowledge even if what we treat as evidence is not evidence. (157-8)