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Epistemic Subjectivism

ABSTRACT

Epistemic subjectivism, as I am using the term, is a view in the same spirit as relativism, rooted in skepticism about the objectivity or universality of epistemic norms. I explore some ways that we might motivate subjectivism drawing from some common themes in analytic epistemology. Without diagnosing where the arguments go wrong, I argue that the resulting position is untenable.

When we peek outside of mainstream analytic epistemology we often find suspicion toward claims of objectivity, or epistemic evaluations transcending cultural contexts. We hear claims along the following lines: "All knowledge is situated." "All knowledge reflects the cultural and political context of the knowledge producers." While most of us are not sure what they mean, claims of this sort usually make Anglo-American philosophers (not to mention Australians) want to reach for their guns. Paul Boghossian (2006) takes on the worthy task of trying to see how a kind of "postmodernist" epistemology – more specifically, a version of epistemic relativism – might be motivated from *within* traditional epistemology. I want to try something similar. That is, I will take some ideas that can seem plausible even to those of us in the Sensible Party, and see how they might tempt us into a kind of view that most of us will find untoward. The kind of view that I will be considering is somewhat different from that which Boghossian discusses, as I hope to make clear presently. I will suggest some difficulties with the view in question. But unfortunately, unlike Boghossian, I will not have the space to adequately debunk the view that I set up.

1. RELATIVISM AND SUBJECTIVISM

The view that I want to consider has similar roots to epistemic relativism as it involves skepticism about the universality of various epistemic norms. Most of us like to think that there are objective epistemic standards, rules that govern what we are to believe in various circumstances. So there are various canons of inductive reasoning, for instance, which are thought to have a kind of authority over everyone in any circumstance. These standards are what determine whether a subject is rational, or justified, or the like in their beliefs. From what I can make of it, doubts that there are such universally applicable epistemic standards are at least *one* theme of recent postmodernist thought.

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We can get clearer about the issues by considering analogous views in ethics and metaethics. There is a simplistic ethical view, one that is perhaps not endorsed by many serious philosophers, that sometimes gets labeled "relativism". According to the view I have in mind, the kind of moral rules that many of us endorse need not apply to people in different cultural contexts. Rather, how you should behave is determined by the norms accepted by your society, or perhaps those you happen personally to endorse. We needn't fuss over whether this view deserves the name "relativism", but we should distinguish it from the more subtle view that philosophers such as Gilbert Harman (1996) have identified as "moral relativism". According to the subtle view, an action may be morally permissible relative to one moral framework, but impermissible relative to another, just as my pencil can be moving relative to the table but stationary relative to my hand. Of course we typically say things like "It was wrong of you to cheat on your taxes", without any explicit reference to a moral framework. But according to the relativist, the only kind of facts there are for such an assertion to express take the form:

It was wrong of you to cheat on your taxes relative to moral framework M.

(Someone may succeed in expressing such a fact, even if she mistakenly holds that there are absolute moral facts, just as someone can express a truth by asserting "This pencil is moving" even if she mistakenly believes in absolute motion.) Someone may insist: "Yes of course his cheating might be wrong relative to moral framework M, but not wrong relative to M*, just as it might be wrong according to Kant but not according to Aristotle. But there is a further question: Was it wrong *period*? Not relative to this or that, but just plain wrong. Or if you like, is it wrong relative to the *correct* standards of morality?" According to the relativist, there are no facts answering to the questions urged here.

The simplistic view that I sketched is best understood as involving an *absolute* moral claim, an endorsement of a single meta-rule, roughly: follow those rules sanctioned by your society (or in another version: follow the rules that you yourself judge to be correct). The subtle relativist needn't endorse anything of the sort. He might insist that whether you should cheat on your taxes has nothing whatever to do with what you or your culture happen to endorse. He might even insist that cheating on taxes is wrong for everyone at all times! He will simply note that the truth he is expressing attributes wrongness relative to a moral framework, namely *his* own moral framework, and there is no fact as to whether his own framework is more correct than another.

The epistemic relativism that Boghossian considers is the analogue of the subtle moral relativism.[1] According to this view, there are no absolute facts concerning what justifies what. We might say

Evidence E justifies belief B

But the only facts there are for such an assertion to express take the form:

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Relative to epistemic system C, E justifies B.

The view that I want to consider is more akin to simplistic moral relativism with the focus being on the individual subject's view, rather than that of his cultural context. (Of course cultural factors will influence his view). A better label for the position might be Epistemic Subjectivism.[2] Roughly, the idea is that what I (epistemically) ought to believe depends on which epistemic rules *I* happen to accept. There is no higher authority, as it were, governing what *I* should believe beyond what seems right to *me*. And the same of course goes for you (you are your own authority, that is, not me). The upshot is that we may all go about forming our beliefs in different ways, and indeed believe many different things. But no one need be going astray epistemically. The search for more specific rules applying to everyone by which we might distinguish those whose beliefs are justified from those whose are not is futile.

This is still a rather rough presentation of the kind of position I have in mind. Indeed, there isn't any very precise view that I have in mind. It might better be understood as a tendency to see the epistemic status of a person's beliefs as depending heavily on the subject's individual perspective rather than being determined by some universal set of standards. This kind of attitude can be taken to different degrees, and perhaps no one will want to endorse it at its furthest extreme.

2. THREE THEMES OF ANALYTIC EPISTEMOLOGY

The three themes in contemporary epistemology that I will be drawing on are *instrumentalism*, *internalism*, and *conservatism*. I will try to say something to motivate each of these in turn. Of course each of these faces various objections and the issues involved are far more subtle or complex than I am able to address here. My purpose is just to bring out the way that each of these views can seem plausible and then see where they lead us.

2.1 Instrumentalism

What I am calling instrumentalism might not have played a prominent explicit role in contemporary epistemology, but is there in the background. What is the nature of distinctively *epistemic* norms of belief? What makes epistemic rationality different from forms of practical rationality? At least part of the answer, many would assume, must have something to do with *truth*. In some sense that may be hard to pin down, belief aims at the truth.[3] When we engage in any inquiry we are engaged in the pursuit of truth. We are seeking the answers, the *correct* answers to the questions we pose. It is natural to suppose that *epistemic* evaluation is an evaluation of how we are doing with respect to our goal of finding the truth. So the thought is that epistemic rationality is to be understood along the lines of instrumental or means-ends rationality. The rough idea is that the epistemic rationality of a belief is a matter of how the means of belief formation is conducive to the end of obtaining the truth.[4]

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There are various complications here of course. If true belief was the only cognitive goal we could achieve it by believing everything. Furthermore, in many practical cases where we have no more reason to take one option over another, it is often appropriate to take either one. But if I have no more epistemic reason to believe that P than to believe that not-P, then it is not epistemically rational for me to believe either. By itself, the truth-directedness of belief does not seem to account for this. Guessing is a truth-directed activity (Owens 2003). In guessing whether or not P I am aiming to guess correctly if I can. But there is nothing wrong with guessing that P when I have no more reason to do so than to guess that not-P. Not so with believing that P. Perhaps we can accommodate this by noting the additional goal of avoiding false belief. So our situation is more like one of those tests where points are deducted for incorrect answers. A wild guess is not wise when we have no more reason to take one rather than another. Of course this raises the question to which William James (1897) drew our attention of how these twin goals are to be balanced. But we needn't try to settle these details here.

As it stands, the instrumentalist conception of epistemic rationality appears vulnerable to a barrage of objections posed by Thomas Kelly (2003). We normally think of the instrumental rationality of something as depending on what a subject's goals happen to be. But even if we all happen to have the formation of true beliefs as a goal for the most part, we often don't in certain cases. As Kelly notes, we might want very much not to have a true belief about the ending of a movie we haven't seen. But when an inconsiderate friend blurts it out, we may very well have an epistemic reason to believe him. It may be epistemically irrational to believe otherwise. This case and others like it appear to show that the epistemic status of my beliefs has nothing much to do with any cognitive goals I happen to have.

While Kelly's point is surely correct, I don't think it cuts to the heart of the kind of view I am considering. I will try to illustrate why by considering an analogous idea. Consider the notion of a *financially wise* decision (perhaps more awkwardly we could say 'financially *rational*'). To evaluate an investment choice as financially unwise appears to be to evaluate how it tends to promote certain financial goals such as increasing financial security. But in making such an assessment we don't usually feel the need to inquire as to what any individual's goals happen to be. If someone happened to have the goal of becoming bankrupt and destitute, we wouldn't necessarily retract our claim that the investment choice was financially unwise. We may or may not take issue with his eccentric plans. If we don't we might say something like, "Well it's a financially unwise choice, but given that you are aiming for financial ruin, you might as well go ahead." It appears that what we are doing is evaluating the choice with respect to the goal of financial security, regardless of whether an individual happens to have this goal.

I understand the instrumentalist account of epistemic rationality in a similar way. Epistemic evaluation is a matter of evaluating beliefs with respect to the goal of obtaining the truth, regardless of whether someone happens to have this as their goal. This might not count as instrumentalism on Kelly's conception, but I propose

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that for our purposes we understand the term more broadly. The point of calling it an *instrumental* conception of epistemic rationality is that it involves an evaluation with respect to a certain *end*. Suppose someone was to claim that something's being financially unwise has nothing to do with any end whether actual or hypothetical. It is just a *sui generis* property of some actions that needn't have anything to do with the attainment of financial security. This would be an odd view. We might well wonder why anyone should care to make financially wise choices if this had nothing to do attaining financial security. Similarly, many would find the view that epistemic rationality is some kind of *sui generis* feature of a belief that needn't bear any relation to truth rather odd. We might well wonder why we should even care if our beliefs enjoy the status of being rational if this has no connection to whether the belief is true.

2.2 Internalism

Internalism comes in many varieties, as do its motivations. We will not be concerned with the details of the different versions of internalism here. The rough idea is that the important epistemic attributes such as justification and rationality are ones to which a subject enjoys a certain cognitive access. To get clearer than this, perhaps it is best to approach the idea via some of the thoughts that motivate it. We can begin with what we can call the *guidance* motivation for internalism. Judgments of justification play a certain regulatory role in our cognitive lives. I seek to form justified beliefs as a means to forming true beliefs. The realization that my belief that P is justified should bolster my conviction that P, while discovering that I am unjustified should diminish it. Suppose that justification consists in some kind of external condition like having been formed by a reliable process, or being counterfactually sensitive to the facts. How am I to tell if I meet such a condition? And if I can't, how can considerations of justification regulate my beliefs? Perhaps I could make an appointment at the cognitive science lab to learn more about my belief formation capacities. If I learn that I form my beliefs in a reliable or an unreliable manner, this information will be relevant to whether I should continue to believe that P. But on the face of it, it would seem that such facts about reliability become relevant to what I should believe *only once I become aware of them*. What I am I to do in the meantime? I need *now* to form some judgment as to whether P, and I am seeking to do so by considering what I ought to believe, what I'm justified in believing, or what it would be rational for me to believe. It is no help to be told that I will have to wait to find out what it is that I'm justified in believing.

An externalist might respond, "Tough luck. You'll have to be patient, or get by without this information. Not all epistemology can be done from the armchair." But it is not at all clear that I can be patient, at least if any of my current beliefs is to be justified. The question of what, if anything, I'm justified in believing with respect to P is the question of what doxastic attitude I should take to the proposition. If I'm trying to figure out whether P, but I can't tell what would be the appropriate attitude to take, then it is difficult, if not entirely impossible to form any opinion as to whether P at all. If I am really stuck, unable to tell what it would be right, or reasonable for me to

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believe, I can feel doxastically paralyzed.

In any event, there are challenging considerations suggesting that if I can't tell whether I'm justified in believing that P, then I'm not justified in believing it. More precisely, a case can be made for a principle of epistemic ascent:

> **Epistemic Ascent**: S's belief that P is justified only if S is justified in believing that his belief that P is justified.[5]

The case for Epistemic Ascent is as follows. An unjustified belief is unlikely to be true. Of course it does occasionally happen that an unjustified belief – a belief grounded in wishful thinking or confused reasoning, say – turns out by dumb luck to be correct. But we shouldn't expect any belief that isn't justified to be true. This is at least one reason why, as most would agree, if I have reason to believe that my belief that P is *not* justified, then I shouldn't believe it. For in this case I should judge it unlikely that my belief that P is true, and hence doubt that it is true. And I can't coherently believe that P while doubting whether my belief that P is true. But the same seems to apply, albeit to a lesser degree, in the case where I can't tell either way as to whether I am justified in believing that P. For in this case I should have no idea as to whether my belief that P is likely to be true. But then it is hard to see how in this case it can be reasonable for me to put much confidence in P's being true and hence to believe that P. So it appears that in any case in which one is not justified in believing that one's belief that P is justified, one is not justified in believing that P.

If Epistemic Ascent is correct, then it is doubtful that the various proposed external conditions such as reliability can be necessary for justification. For presumably one is not justified in believing that one's faculties are reliable without some further empirical investigation.[6]

2.3 Conservatism

There is a cluster of ideas labeled as conservative in epistemology.[7] The common theme involves a favoring of one's own current views. According to conservatism, one's beliefs are to be considered innocent until shown guilty. One version involves a principle along the following lines.

> **Principle of Conservatism**: You are justified in continuing to hold a belief unless a challenge arises from within your beliefs.

Many philosophers balk at such a principle. To defend it we can begin by getting the obvious knee-jerk reactions out of the way. Does the principle entail that I can just randomly form a belief and it will be justified once I believe it? Not necessarily. My knowledge that I have formed the belief in a random manner can itself constitute a challenge to that belief. Doesn't the principle encourage intellectual laziness, if it says that my beliefs are epistemically just fine as long as no challenge arises? Not necessarily.

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The goal of inquiry is not simply to have our belief as to whether P be justified, it is to get it right. Rigorous critical reflection is conducive to getting at the truth.

We can best get at the motivation behind the Principle of Conservatism by considering methodological questions. How are we to go about our inquiries? I think it is fair to say that none of us even tries to engage in Descartes' project of starting from a clean slate, trusting none of our opinions and building up from scratch. At least implicitly, few of us think that this would be a good way to proceed even if we had the time and patience. Why would we proceed this way? There is of course the worry that some of my beliefs may be false. And it would be nice to have a secure foundation for everything I believe. But to abandon all that I believe, would, from my perspective, be to abandon a great deal of valuable truth, with no guarantee that I will gain it back when I rebuild. Indeed, if I were to raze the edifice of my beliefs, it is doubtful that I would get far at all in rebuilding. Arguably we always need some background theory to work with in evaluating any new hypotheses.

The way that we actually *do* proceed – and implicitly judge that we ought to proceed – is better captured by the story of Neurath's boat. We are always relying on the majority of the boat's planks while we make the replacements and augmentations that seem required. We rely on one part of the boat while we test the sturdiness of another part, then shift our position to check other parts that we had previously put our trust in. We work with what we've got. We treat our beliefs as innocent until shown guilty. The same goes for the methods and standards we apply in adjusting and evaluating our beliefs. We don't first try to establish the cogency of such methods before applying them. We do at times turn our critical attention to these methods but in doing so we are applying other methods whose validity we take for granted.

It appears to be a short step from this methodological point to the statement of the Principle of Conservatism stated in terms of *justification*. Our practice suggests that we implicitly accept the following: we are justified in continuing to believe what we believe, while engaging in critical reflection. Only when such reflection raises challenges from within my overall set of beliefs is a change in belief called for.

Understood in this way, conservatism is an internalist epistemology. According to conservatism, whether one is justified is a matter of how one's beliefs cohere from within one's own perspective. Provided one has not encountered a conflict within one's views, one's beliefs are justified. It is interesting to look at what is said in this regard by an epistemologist who would appear to be at the other extreme from the internalist approach that I've been considering here. In an important paper criticizing internalism, Alvin Goldman (1980) argues against what above I called the *guidance* motivation for internalism. Recall that according to the guidance motivation, judgments of whether one is justified in believing that P should play a guiding role in our inquiries. Roughly: I am to endeavor to believe only what I am justified in believing. If I can't tell whether I would be justified in believing that P, I can hardly follow the rule of believing only what I'm justified in believing. If, as the externalist would have it, I need more than internal reflection to determine whether I'm justified, it is hard to see how justification can play this regulative role. Perhaps if I had the time I could carry out the empirical

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investigation required to learn whether I meet some external condition – that my faculties are functioning reliably, say. And the information I gained from such an inquiry would be useful. But I need *now* to form an opinion as to whether P. Internally inaccessible conditions are no use to me in determining what attitude I should take to P in the meantime. So it appears that the externalist conception of justification can't do justice to the regulative role that justification must play.

The worry about this line of reasoning that Goldman clearly brings out, is that this appeal to the regulative role of justification seems to be committed to a demand that cannot be satisfied. Even if the justificatory status of my beliefs is internally accessible to me, how am I to gain access to it? What guidance is available in determining whether I am justified in believing that P? I should only believe that I am justified in believing that P if I am justified in believing that I am so justified. But how am I to tell whether I am justified in believing that I am justified in believing that P? According to the guidance motivation for internalism, it appears that I need to be able to tell whether I'm justified in believing that I'm justified in believing that P, in order to tell whether I'm justified in believing that P, in order to figure out whether to believe that P. And in order to tell this I will have to be justified...You get the idea. It looks as though if guidance via judgments of justificatory status are required in order to figure out what to believe, we can never get started in figuring out anything. If it is allowed that we can legitimately form beliefs without such guidance, the guidance motivation for internalism loses its force.

While this response to the internalist may seem compelling, we are still left with the legitimate question: How should I go about forming my beliefs? Indeed Goldman takes such a question seriously. He does not give it the obviously inappropriate answer: Form your beliefs by reliable processes. That advice is no help before we have determined which are the reliable processes. (One might as well suggest: form only true beliefs). The answer Goldman offers is along the following lines: Take whatever belief formation habits you currently have, and use them to form theories by which you can critically evaluate how reliable those methods are, adjusting your methods (and perhaps the beliefs formed by the use of the original methods) accordingly. As Goldman notes, not only are you able to follow this advice, it is hard to see how you could have any other option.

Surprisingly, Goldman's advice seems to be very much in the spirit of the kind of internalist epistemic conservatism we have been considering. The current methods we find ourselves with (and presumably our current beliefs which were formed by these methods) are given the benefit of the doubt. They are to be used until one finds a reason to abandon them in the light of other beliefs formed by those methods. Indeed Goldman's suggestion seems to give us most of what the conservative insists upon. It would appear to be a short step from such claims about how we *should* form our beliefs, to claims about what beliefs we are *justified* in believing. Indeed, don't these amount to much the same thing? In the case of actions, if I should do something then surely I am justified in doing it. Similarly, if I form my beliefs as I should, how could I not be justified holding these beliefs?

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On Goldman's reliablist account of justification, this is not so. It *could* be that the habits of reasoning I first find myself with are unreliable ones. This unreliability may even be compounded as I use these methods to assess their own reliability, leading me to judge even more unreliable methods to be more reliable. The result could be that all of my beliefs have been formed by unreliable processes. In this case, according to reliablism, none of my beliefs are justified. Nevertheless, I have formed each of these beliefs just as I *should* have by Goldman's account: I have applied those methods that come naturally to me, critically evaluating and adjusting them as I go by the use of those methods.

Some conservative internalists will be tempted to respond, "Well, if you insist on using 'justified' to apply to reliably formed beliefs we can't stop you. Reliability with respect to truth is sure enough *an* attribute with relevance to epistemology. But the central normative question of epistemology – the one we thought we were trying to capture by our use of 'justification' – is the question of *what we should believe*. (What could be more central to the purposes of epistemology than turning our critical attention to the formation and management of beliefs and asking if we are doing it right, asking if we are believing as we should?) But with regard to *this* question, we seem to be in agreement."

3. EPISTEMIC SUBJECTIVISM

It is time to see how the themes developed here bear on the kind epistemic subjectivism that I am concerned with here. The view under attack has it that there are certain epistemic standards, certain rules determining what is to be believed in various evidential situations, and that these govern whether one's beliefs are rational or justified or the like. The crucial point is that these rules apply to a subject regardless of whether he happens to endorse them, or thinks they are correct, or anything like that. These just are the correct epistemic standards. And to the extent that anyone deviates from them their beliefs are less than fully rational regardless how they view themselves.

Of course it is rather difficult to say just what these rules are precisely. But we needn't be precise for our purposes. Let's just consider any rule, such as a canon of inductive reasoning. The crucial question here is: What is it about such a rule that makes it an *epistemically correct* one? That is, in virtue of what is it the case reasoning in accordance with this rule, or failing to, is relevant to whether one is justified or rational?

Picking up on the instrumentalist theme, the first thing we might like to say is that the rule had better have some kind of appropriate connection to the truth. Otherwise why would it even be of interest in epistemology? In inquiry we are in the business of finding the answers (the correct answers) to certain questions. If epistemic evaluation is to aid us in this quest, it had better not be irrelevant to whether our beliefs are true. So perhaps we want to say that the rules determining whether one is justified are those that reliably lead us to the truth.

But now drawing on the internalist's thoughts, how could the fact that a method *happens* to be reliable be relevant to whether I am justified in employing it? Of course

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if I can tell that it is reliable then it makes sense to use it as a means to the truth. But according to the internalist, that my belief that P happens to bear some reliable connection to the facts without my realizing that it does no more renders it justified than the fact that this belief happens to be *true* does. Consider again the instrumentalist's slogan that epistemic rationality is means-ends rationality with respect to the goal of truth. On one way of taking it, this threatens to collapse justification into truth. One can hardly do better with respect to the truth-goal than to form a true belief. And one can hardly do worse with respect to the truth-goal than to believe what isn't true. So it appears that on this account, a belief is epistemically rational or justified if and only if it is true. This cannot be right. The natural move here is to consider not whether believing that P would in fact be to believe the truth, but how the matter seems from the point of view of the subject. To take the familiar illustration, if the glass on my table happens to contain gasoline, then in one sense I have a strong reason not to drink it even if I firmly believe that it contains water. But when it comes to evaluating whether I am being *rational* in drinking from the glass, the actual contents of the glass seem irrelevant. What matters is just whether I happen to believe there to be just water in the glass. Rationality is a matter of what one does with what one has to go on. If I'm thirsty and I take there to be just water in the glass then it is entirely appropriate for me to pick it up and drink it. I cannot be faulted for doing so.

Similarly, the rational way for me to proceed in forming beliefs should be to form them in ways that *I* take to be conducive to arriving at the truth. If it seems to *me* that reasoning in a certain way will likely lead me to true beliefs, then it makes sense for me to reason this way, regardless of whether it will in fact lead me to truth or even whether it is objectively likely to. For if my goal is to believe what is true, how could it be reasonable to proceed in any way other than what I take to be conducive to this goal?

Of course the picture emerging here naturally fits with conservatism. Among my beliefs are beliefs about how best to go about reasoning to get to the truth. Like my other beliefs, according to conservatism, these enjoy *prima facie* justification. I'm entitled to accept these methodological convictions until a conflict arises with other beliefs. Now if I'm justified in believing that my calculator will most likely give me the correct answer, then I am surely justified in believing the answer it gives me. Similarly, if I am justified in believing that a certain way of forming beliefs will most likely lead me to the truth, then surely I am justified in the beliefs I form in this way.

On the kind of view that we have arrived at, there is not much that can be said in a very general way about how we are to go about forming beliefs beyond: pursue the truth as you see fit. There are no more specific epistemic principles that have universal application. Is it irrational to commit the gambler's fallacy? Can one be justified in concluding that P on the basis of a fallacious inference like affirming the consequent? On the subjectivist view, it all depends on how things stand from the perspective of the individual subject. Someone who affirms the consequent might well *think* that it is a valid form of inference. So from his point of view, drawing the truth of the conclusion that P is guaranteed by the truth of his premises. That the inference happens in fact

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to be invalid is irrelevant to whether our friend is justified in his conclusion, just as it is irrelevant whether the conclusion he draws happens to be *true*. Truth, logical validity, reliability, and the like, these are all *objective* matters having to do with how things stand independently of any thinking subject. Justification, rationality, and such normative epistemic attributes are, we might say, *subjective* matters, having intimately to do with how things seem from the subject's point of view.[8]

What people believe and their basic habits of thought are no doubt influenced by their cultural backgrounds and so on. So we should expect there to be a fair amount of cultural variation in different people's inferential practices and epistemic standards. On the subjectivist view there is no neutral standpoint, as it were, from which we can critically judge culturally alien ways of thinking. All epistemic evaluations must be made from *within* some epistemic framework. Perhaps we can judge how well someone is living up to *their own* epistemic standards. But this is as far as a critique can legitimately go. For on this view, believing in a way that is from one's own point of view the best way to approach the truth is the best one can do epistemically in believing.

From what I can make of it, something like the subjectivism that I have been sketching is at work in some of the epistemological thinking in the humanities outside of analytic philosophy departments. Sometimes we hear that this is the only intellectual option for enlightened people today. Needless to say, this is hardly the case. Quite apart from self-referential worries – what if I happen to believe that a more objectivist epistemology is correct, and believe that thinking so is necessary in order to pursue the truth? – I have given only a sketch of possible motivations for subjectivism and there are any number of ways that one might resist the moves made here. Even if we could identify no flaws in the route that took us to subjectivism, one might well take the conclusion as a *reductio* on some of the assumptions made. Some will think that it is just obvious that, say, the gambler's fallacy is the wrong way to reason, and that any line of reasoning that leads us to think that it might not be for some people must have gone astray (see for example Stich 1998).

4. What's wrong with subjectivism?

Rather than try to diagnose the many ways in which the motivations for subjectivism might be misguided, I want to look more deeply at what seems unsatisfactory about the position. First, an obvious worry is that the motivations for the subjectivism can be pushed to absurd extremes. Conservatism is one thing, but an ultra-conservative dogmatism might be defended along similar lines. If I believe that P, then from my point of view this belief is true, and hence I should judge that I have done as well as I can with respect to the goal of truth. Not only should I be reluctant to abandon this conviction in the absence of a challenge from within my beliefs, I should wish to avoid all such challenges. For if I allow myself to critically rethink my commitment to P, there is a chance that I might conclude that I was mistaken. But from my perspective now, to change my mind as to whether P would be to be lead into error. Of course I don't want that. So it is better for me to avoid all possible challenges and cling dogmatically to my

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current convictions. No one, I take it, wants to endorse this sort of attitude.[9]

Can this extreme be resisted without abandoning the motivations for milder subjectivism? It is not clear that it can. Perhaps acknowledging the *possibility* of being mistaken should motivate me to critically rethink my views. I might be mistaken in believing that P, and in the event that I am I should like to have this error rectified. Critically evaluating my belief might result in my seeing the error of my ways, and so I have reason not to be dogmatic. But on the other hand, while I *might* be wrong about P, I now judge it very unlikely that I am (since I believe that P). So it seems that I more run the risk of being led into error by being open to the possibility that I am now in error. If a legitimate challenge to my belief that P were to arise upon critical reflection, then I would be *justified* in abandoning my conviction. But according to conservatism, as long as I complacently and uncritically believe that P I am justified. So there is no obvious advantage to being undogmatic from a conservative point of view.

Let's suppose that this argument can be resisted, and that one's belief that P cannot be used as a justification for avoiding all possible changes of view. This brings us to a different sort of worry. You and I might have radically different points of view and fundamentally different habits of thought. Nevertheless, individually our general views might cohere very well. Our various beliefs, our epistemic judgments, and our methods and epistemic principles might be internally in reflective equilibrium. We might each be doing rather well, from our own perspectives, at the tasks of reasoned inquiry. But according to the subjectivist, while our respective ways of thinking may seem very alien to each other, there is no epistemic criticism that either of us can offer the other. We are each justified in our beliefs. Our situations are symmetrical except that in so far as we disagree, if one of us believes the truth, the other does not. We might each think the other is in error concerning the facts. But if we are subjectivists, our *epistemic* evaluation will be along the lines of 'I'm okay, you're okay.'

The worry that arises here concerns a disturbing degree of *arbitrariness* that we seem to be committed to on this view.[10] On the subjectivist view, some of my convictions can be supported by others within my total view. But what can be said in favor of my *total* view over yours? At bottom it seems only this: that it happens to be *mine*. But if that is all it comes down to, it is hard to see why I should feel much in the way of commitment to my own point of view. If your point of view is just as rational as mine, why shouldn't I feel free to arbitrarily abandon my overall view (if that were possible) and adopt yours? That it happens to be mine can hardly serve as a basis for a preference for my point of view over another that I judge to be epistemically on a par.

I'm reminded of the joke: I'm glad I hate Brussels sprouts. Because if I didn't, I would probably eat them – and I *hate* Brussels sprouts. Of course I would have no real qualms about developing a taste for Brussels sprouts (provided I didn't have to eat them in order to develop the appreciation). For I don't really judge, say, my wife's love of Brussels sprouts to be inferior to my own revulsion. The idea of enjoying Brussels sprouts is very alien to me. But if I were able to adopt this appreciation I would see things differently. Indeed I wouldn't mind seeing what it is like to enjoy Brussels sprouts. It would be silly to be attached to my own current set of tastes just because

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they happen to be mine. I could just as well make some others mine. Similarly, while they might seem alien to me now, once I took on a radically different set of beliefs and habits of thinking they would seem entirely correct and appropriate to me. If I really judge this different point of view to be as rational as my own, then the choice of which to adopt as my own seems entirely arbitrary. If there were some feasible way to adopt a different total view, then I might as well just flip a coin to decide which to adopt.

Perhaps some subjectivists would not see this as a bad thing. Most of us would agree that there are no universally applicable rules of etiquette or social norms. Which manners are appropriate very much depends on one's cultural context. There is nothing wrong with immersing oneself in a foreign culture and adopting their radically different social conventions and values. Indeed there is much to be gained by learning to appreciate a different but equally valid way of life. Similarly it might be thought admirable to "try on" a radically different but equally rational view of the world.

However, the analogy breaks down when it is *truth* that is at stake. If my own beliefs are largely true then those of a radically different total view are largely false. If my choice of total belief systems might just as well have been chosen by a flip of a coin, then how can I put more confidence in the truth of my beliefs than I would in the outcome of a coin toss? And if I can have little confidence in the *truth* of my beliefs, how can I even continue to hold these beliefs?[11]

5. CONCLUSION

I've suggested that some familiar ideas in mainstream analytic epistemology can tempt one into a position of epistemic subjectivism. But subjectivism seems to be vulnerable to a kind of instability. Insofar as I judge that there is nothing more to the ultimate basis of my beliefs than that they are my beliefs, and that they are no better off epistemically than some very different beliefs, it is hard to see how I can rationally maintain my convictions. Untangling these problems needs further work.

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NOTES

1 Field (1982) gives a clear statement and brief defense of this kind of relativism.
2 This appears to be what Luper (2004) calls 'subjectivist relativism'.
3 See Williams (1973), Velleman (2000), and Wedgwood (2002).
4 Views along these lines can be found in Foley (1987), Laudan (1990), Kitcher (1992), Nozick (1993), Quine (1986), Kornblith (1993), and Papineau (1999).
5 "is justified in believing" should be understood in the sense of *propositional* justification. In this sense, one can be justified in believing one's belief that P is justified without actually having any belief as to whether one's belief that P is justified. So the principle does not have the consequence that in order for one's belief that P to be justified one must have an infinite hierarchy of beliefs of the form: I am justified in believing that I'm justified in believing that ....
6 Internalist arguments along these lines can be found in BonJour (1985).
7 See Harman (1986), Quine and Ullian (1978), Lycan (1988), and Vahid (2004).
8 Richard Foley (1987) defends a view along these lines, but it is stated with a counterfactual clause: a belief is rational if upon sufficient reflection you would think that holding the belief was an effective means to the goal of believing just what is true. This puts rationality

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at a step removed from the subject's current perspective. An internalist might complain that what I *would* believe upon a lot of reflection is irrelevant to what I should *actually* believe *now*. The rationality of a belief *prior* to extensive reflection should only depend on how it *currently* strikes me that my formation of beliefs is truth-conducive.

9 The worry is similar to a puzzle attributed to Saul Kripke and found in Harman (1973). The original puzzle concerned the possibility of dismissing counterevidence when encountered. I'm concerned with the avoidance of such encounters.

10 I develop the following kind of objection in more detail in White (2005).

11 Some subjectivists might respond by rejecting the idea of objective *truth*. I am unable to make sense of this suggestion and so don't know how to pursue it. Boghossian (2006) contains a valiant attempt.

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