**Phil. 270, Tuesday, 3/28/17  
Conservatism vs. Evidentialism, and the Structure of Justification**

**Conservatism vs. Evidentialism -- from previous (3/9) handout**

-Conservatives like Reid (and Huemer, whose spat with BonJour eerily recreates Reid’s 18th Century debate with his foes) like to see their opponents not only as “semi-skeptics,” but also as (what is really the flip-side of the same coin) “semi-conservatives”: as (arbitrarily) choosey conservatives.

-Huemer’s non-conservatives-are-self-undermining! argument

-But their opponents may well instead view themselves as something very different: as evidentialists: “No, I’m not picking some natural sources of belief to get some kind of favored status. I don’t care about any natural sources of belief, how things appear to me, or anything like that. For me, rational justification results from having beliefs that are supported by one’s evidence!”

I fight this out with Descartes (or his ghost) in the long footnote (#30) on the bottom of p. 46 (spilling over a bit to the bottom of 47) of reading #22.

-To discuss this great conflict of conservatism vs. evidentialism in epistemology, we start with some background on the structure of justification…

**Structure of Justification/Warrant: Foundationalism, Coherentism, Foundherentism**

-An important argument for properly basic beliefs (justified beliefs that are not justified by being based on other beliefs) can be driven by:

-Non-Skepticism: some beliefs are justified

-Basing-Possession Requirement: If belief A is justified because it is based on belief B (perhaps among others), belief B must be justified

-Non-Circuitry: If belief A is justified at least in part by being directly or indirectly based on belief B, then belief B cannot be justified by being based, even in part, directly or indirectly, on belief A

-Non-Infinitism: Beliefs are not justified by infinitely long series of basings

-Properly basic beliefs naturally lead to Foundationalism, on which our justified beliefs fall into two camps, (1) “foundational” beliefs that are (somehow) immediately justified, with all other beliefs (those in the “superstructure”) being evidentially based, directly or indirectly, on the foundational ones.

-Coherentism avoids properly basic beliefs (and skepticism) by denying the Non-Circuitry principle. For the coherentist, our beliefs are justified by relations of positive coherence among them, which involves mutual basing.

-Founderentism (or “Weak Foundationalism”) results from loosening up the second and third principles [A can be in part based on B and B in part on A, so long as the warrant A receives from B did not in turn come from A (or vice versa): There can be partial mutual basing, so long as no warrant moves in a circuit], converting the argument for properly basic beliefs into an argument for some beliefs having some immediate warrant (warrant or justification a belief has that does not come from its being based on other beliefs). For the foundherentist, some beliefs somehow possess some immediate warrant, which can then be enhanced by relations of mutual support among them.

-Foundationalism and foundherentism do, but coherentism does not, involve immediate warrant.

-Coherentism and foundherentism do, but foundationalism does not, involve relations of mutual support among beliefs; relations of “positive coherence” play an important role.

**Regress Argument for Skepticism**

Our argument for properly basic beliefs/foundationalism can be converted to an argument for skepticism by replacing non-skepticism with:

-General Basing Requirement: To be justified, a belief must be well based on other beliefs

**Foundationalist Evidentialism**

What is evidentialism?

“We advocate evidentialism. Evidentialism is the view that epistemic justification is a product of evidence. More precisely, it holds that: S is justified in believing p at t iff S’s evidence at t on balance supports p.” –Earl Conee and Richard Feldman

-How to be a foundationalist evidentialist: there are proper basic beliefs, so these justified beliefs are not based on other beliefs (so the General Basing Requirement is rejected), but they are still based on evidence—evidence to which the Basing Requirement doesn’t apply. Often posited as such evidence: sensory states / sensations.

**Propositionality of Evidence:** Our *fundamental* evidence is only propositions: When something other than a proposition serves as (non-fundamental) evidence (e.g., a bloody knife, a sensation), it does so by virtue of propositions connected with it serving as fundamental evidence.

-Williamson argues for something like our propositionality of evidence (though I’m not sure whether his conclusion is exactly as our formulation above):

[W]here evidence does enable us to answer a question, a central way for it to do so is by inference to its best explanation. Thus evidence is the kind of thing which hypotheses explain. But the kind of thing which hypotheses explain is propositional. Therefore evidence is propositional.

The kind of thing which hypotheses explain is propositional. Inference to the best explanation concerns why-explanations, which can be put in the form “--- because … ”, which is ungrammatical unless declarative sentences, complements for “that”, replace the blanks. We cannot simply explain Albania, for “Albania because … ” is ill-formed. We can sometimes make sense of the injunction “Explain Albania!”, but only when the context allows us to interpret it as an injunction to explain why Albania exists, or has some distinctive feature. What follows “why” is a declarative sentence, expressing the proposition to be explained—that Albania exists, or that it has the distinctive feature. Likewise for events: “Explain World War I!” enjoins one to explain why it occurred, or had some distinctive feature. Again, the sensation in my throat is evidence for the conclusion that I am getting a cold in the sense that the hypothesis that I am getting a cold would best explain why I have that sensation in my throat. The evidence to be explained is that I have that sensation in my throat (not just that I have a sensation in my throat). Even in the courts, the bloodied knife provides evidence because the prosecution and defence offer competing hypotheses as to why it was bloodied or how it came into the accused’s possession; the evidential proposition is that it was bloodied or that it came into the accused’s possession. The knife is a source of indefinitely many such propositions. –Williamson, “Knowledge as Evidence,” *Mind*, 1997, pp. 725-6

-applied to the possibility of our basic perceptual beliefs about the external world being based on sensations: the propositionalist says: this can happen, but only if propositions about one’s sensations (e.g., that such-and-such sensations occurred) provide fundamental propositional evidence for those perceptual beliefs.

**Conservatism vs. Evidentialism.** The propositionality of evidence leads to conservatism (at least for me): Evidence is propositional; but propositional evidence only justifies a conclusion if you’re justified in believing the propositions that are your evidence; so, in accepting something as evidence, you really are relying on some method of belief formation (as the Conservative thinks).

**Next Time (in addition to what’s left over from this sheet): Putnam, readings 15 & 16**