

# Evidence in Philosophy

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## 1

In most intellectual disciplines, assertions are supposed to be backed by evidence. Mathematicians have proofs, biochemists have experiments, historians have documents. You cannot just say whatever you happen to believe. Is philosophy an exception? That hardly fits the emphasis many philosophers place on *arguing* for one's claims. When they cannot provide a deductive argument, they still offer supporting considerations. Often they cite phenomena which, they suggest, their theory best explains: they provide abductive arguments. Indeed, in the last three sentences I gave evidence that philosophers give evidence; so philosophers *do* sometimes give evidence. Of course, philosophers who give evidence that evidence is relevant in philosophy can be accused of begging the question. But let us proceed on the working hypothesis that evidence plays a role in philosophy not radically different from its role in all other intellectual disciplines. Without such a role, what would entitle philosophy to be regarded as a *discipline* at all?

To describe mathematics, biochemistry, and history as evidence-based disciplines is obviously not to subscribe to any extreme foundationalism. Particular appeals to proofs, experiments, and documents can all be questioned. The same goes for philosophy.

In any evidence-based discipline, it is good for an assertion to be consistent with the evidence. The alternative is inconsistency with the evidence, which is bad. Since consistency and inconsistency are relations among truth-evaluable items, evidence will be treated as consisting of such items, in particular, of propositions. In this sense, the historical evidence is not the physical document itself but various

propositions about it, for example that it is signed “John.” The biochemical evidence is not the experiment as an event but, for example, the proposition that it was carried out with such-and-such results. The mathematical evidence is not the proof as a sequence of steps but, for example, the proposition that the sequence is a correct proof of this claim. This propositional conception of evidence fits the discursive nature of philosophy. When philosophers produce evidence, they produce something truth-evaluable.<sup>1</sup>

Why is it bad for an assertion to be inconsistent with the evidence? A natural answer is: because then it is false. That answer assumes that evidence consists only of *true* propositions. For if an untrue proposition  $p$  is evidence, the proposition that  $p$  is untrue is true but inconsistent with the evidence. Using “fact” for “true proposition,” we may say that evidence consists only of facts. That helps explain the point of conforming one’s beliefs to the evidence.

Although all evidence is true, not all truths are evidence. Some sort of epistemic accessibility is required. Internalists about evidence require the accessibility to be independent of the environment external to the thinker; externalists about evidence reject that requirement. This difference generates a further difference as to what sorts of facts are capable of being evidence. These issues will be considered later.

Since all evidence is true, whatever the evidence entails is also true. The evidence can still support a false proposition non-deductively. If you have not yet heard the result of the lottery, your evidence strongly supports the proposition that your ticket lost, even if in fact it won. Your evidence consists of truths about the lottery available to you at the time.

How can all evidence be true when sometimes the evidence offered turns out to be false? The document was mistranscribed; it was signed “Joan,” not “John.” But the claim that it was signed “Joan” was not really inconsistent with the evidence before the mistranscription was recognized. It was only inconsistent with what was then taken to be the evidence. It was consistent with the fact that the document was transcribed as signed “John.” No evidence was lost when the mistranscription was recognized, and the claim that the document was

<sup>1</sup> Williamson (2000a: 194–200) argues in more detail that propositionality is essential to the functional role of evidence (for the purposes of this chapter, little turns on the choice between sentences and propositions).

signed “Joan” is consistent with the present evidence, so it was consistent with the past evidence. Similarly, biochemists who rely on the misreported results of an experiment are mistaken in saying that part of their evidence for a theory is that the experiment was performed with such-and-such results. Mathematicians who overlook a fallacy in a proof are mistaken in saying that their evidence for the purported theorem is that this sequence of steps is a correct proof of it. Practitioners of any discipline sometimes mistake the extent of their evidence. What is offered as evidence is not always evidence.

Since we can mistake the extent of our evidence, it can be controversial whether a given proposition is evidence. When evidence is not recognized as such, it cannot play its proper role in inquiry. If its status as evidence is controversial, it is not part of the common ground in debate. Relying on a premise one’s opponents have already refused to accept tends to be dialectically useless. They will probably deny that it constitutes evidence; one’s argument will make no headway. As far as possible, we want evidence to play the role of a neutral arbiter between rival theories. Although the complete elimination of accidental mistakes and confusions is virtually impossible, we might hope that whether a proposition constitutes evidence is *in principle* uncontentionally decidable, in the sense that a community of inquirers can always in principle achieve common knowledge as to whether any given proposition constitutes evidence for the inquiry. Call that idea *Evidence Neutrality*. Thus in a debate over a hypothesis **h**, proponents and opponents of **h** should be able to agree whether some claim **p** constitutes evidence without first having to settle their differences over **h** itself. Moreover, that agreement should not be erroneous: here as elsewhere, “decidable” means correctly decidable. Barring accidents, if they agree that **p** constitutes evidence, it does; if they agree that **p** does not constitute evidence, it does not.

One problem for Evidence Neutrality is that the nature of evidence is itself philosophically controversial, as may already be obvious. For example, suppose that a philosophical theory **T** entails that every mathematical theorem is evidence, while another philosophical theory **T\*** entails that no mathematical theorem is evidence. When proponents of **T** debate with proponents of **T\***, whether a given mathematical theorem is evidence is in principle uncontentionally decidable neither positively (since proponents of **T\*** are committed to saying that it is not) nor negatively (since proponents of **T** are committed

to saying that it is). This objection has the faint air of a self-reflexive paradox, however; perhaps it is an isolated singularity. We turn to more general problems for Evidence Neutrality.

Arguing from the Gettier proposition that the subject in a Gettier case lacks knowledge, I conclude that knowledge is not equivalent to justified true belief. Now I meet someone who thinks the Gettier proposition a mere cultural prejudice, not itself evidence. In this context, it is not in principle uncontentiously decidable that the Gettier proposition is evidence. Thus the only way to satisfy Evidence Neutrality is by ruling that the Gettier proposition does not constitute evidence. To argue that knowledge is not equivalent to justified true belief, I must go back a step to less contentious premises. What can they be? My opponent allows that I *believe* the Gettier proposition, and may even admit to feeling an inclination to believe it too (I am not merely idiosyncratic), while overriding it on theoretical grounds. Thus Evidence Neutrality tempts one to retreat into identifying evidence with uncontentious propositions about psychological states, that I believe the Gettier proposition and that both of us are inclined to believe it. How much that helps is questionable. For now I face the challenge of arguing from a psychological premise, that I believe or we are inclined to believe the Gettier proposition, to an epistemological conclusion, the Gettier proposition itself. That gap is not easily bridged.

The example depends on no special feature of the Gettier proposition. Any such premise can be questioned and usually is, by skeptics of one sort or another. The dialectical nature of philosophical inquiry exerts general pressure to psychologize evidence, and so distance it from the non-psychological subject matter of the inquiry.

Attempts have been made to close the gap by psychologizing the subject matter of philosophy. If we are investigating our own concepts, our applications of them must be relevant evidence. But this proposal makes large sacrifices for small gains. As seen in earlier chapters, the subject matter of much philosophy is not conceptual in any distinctive sense. Many epistemologists study knowledge, not just the ordinary concept of knowledge. Metaphysicians who study the nature of identity over time ask how things persist, not how we think or say they persist. In such inquiry, the gap between belief and truth is of the same kind as in most non-philosophical inquiry, and the proposal offers little help. Even when one of our own concepts is our subject matter, our inclination to apply it in a given case by no means

guarantees that the application is correct. Cultural prejudices really do sometimes wear the mask of self-evident truth. More generally, the problem with attempts to defend the philosophies of mind and language on the grounds that beliefs about mind and language have a special epistemic status, because they help to constitute their own subject matter, is not just that to extend the argument to other branches of philosophy is to succumb to the usual idealist fallacies. The argument is weak even for the philosophies of mind and language, since our beliefs about our own mind and language can be false for any number of reasons.<sup>2</sup> The gap between belief and truth never completely disappears.

Evidence Neutrality has no more force in philosophy than in other intellectual disciplines: philosophers are lucky if they achieve as much certainty as the natural sciences, without quixotic aspirations for more. If Evidence Neutrality psychologizes evidence in philosophy, it psychologizes it in the natural sciences too. But it is fanciful to regard evidence in the natural sciences as consisting of psychological facts rather than, for example, facts about the results of experiments and measurements. When scientists state their evidence in their publications, they state mainly non-psychological facts (unless they are psychologists); are they not best placed to know what their evidence is? The psychologization of evidence by Evidence Neutrality should be resisted in the natural sciences; it should be resisted in philosophy too. Moreover, not even psychologizing evidence suffices to meet the demands of Evidence Neutrality. For ascriptions of beliefs or inclinations to belief are contestable too, in ways sketched later in this chapter.

Evidence Neutrality is false. Having good evidence for a belief does not require being able to persuade all comers, however strange their views, that you have such good evidence. No human beliefs pass that test. Even in principle, we cannot always decide which propositions constitute evidence prior to deciding the main philosophical issue; sometimes the latter is properly implicated in the former. Elsewhere, I have argued on more general grounds that we are not always in a position to know whether a proposition constitutes evidence (Williamson 2000a: 93–113, 147–83; 2008a). That argument implies

<sup>2</sup> Hintikka (1999) argues that philosophical appeals to “intuitions” were inspired by the paradigm of Chomsky’s linguistics.

the same conclusion, for when it cannot be known whether  $p$  constitutes evidence, it is not in principle uncontentionably decidable whether  $p$  constitutes evidence. Of course, we can *often* decide whether a proposition constitutes evidence prior to deciding the main issue, otherwise the notion of evidence would be useless. But the two sorts of question cannot be kept in strict isolation from each other.

In this respect, philosophy is no different in principle from inquiry in other areas. Since comprehensive physical theories have implications for the reliability of various forms of observation and measurement, they are not neutral as to which reports of such processes constitute evidence. Which axioms of set theory are legitimately assumed in mathematical proofs is itself a mathematical question. Most of the evidence historians cite can be disputed on the basis of perverse conspiracy theories, which are themselves historical theories, however bad. Although philosophy is unusually tolerant of challenges to evidence, no discipline can afford to exclude them altogether, on pain of fatal gullibility.

How much do failures of Evidence Neutrality threaten the conduct of philosophy? From an internal perspective, they make consensus harder. Each of many conflicting theories may be the one best supported by the evidence by its own lights. The role of evidence as a neutral arbiter is undermined. From an external perspective, both the good fortune of being right and the misfortune of being wrong are magnified. If your theory is true, so are its consequences for which propositions constitute evidence; it will be a reliable methodological guide in your further theorizing. If your theory is false, it may have false consequences for which propositions constitute evidence and be an unreliable guide in your further theorizing (if you are very lucky, its falsity is confined to other areas). Although both internal and external effects are damaging, neither is fatal if the failures of Evidence Neutrality are limited enough. The predicament is not special to philosophy, although it may be worse there than elsewhere. It is not in practice fatal to other disciplines; it is not in principle fatal to philosophy.

Unfortunately, the difficulties consequent on failures of Evidence Neutrality are compounded by unawareness of them in much philosophical writing. That unawareness does more than distort philosophers' descriptions of philosophy. It alters their first-order philosophizing, because the regulation of philosophical debate must

be informed by a conception of its nature. For example, the popular but unclear accusation of “question-begging” is leveled on the basis of assumptions about the scope and purpose of philosophical argument.<sup>3</sup> Philosophers under the influence of Evidence Neutrality tend to reject evidence which is not in principle uncontentionally recognizable as such.

These questions are explored below in more detail. They arise with particular urgency from talk of “intuitions.” When contemporary analytic philosophers run out of arguments, they appeal to intuitions. It can seem, and is sometimes said, that any philosophical dispute, when pushed back far enough, turns into a conflict of intuitions about ultimate premises: “In the end, all we have to go on is our intuitions.” Thus intuitions are presented as our evidence in philosophy.

I have heard a professional philosopher argue that persons are not their brains by saying that he had an intuition that he weighed more than three pounds. Surely there are better ways of weighing oneself than by intuition. But such inapposite appeals to intuition should not be dismissed as mere idiosyncratic misjudgments. They are clues to the role of the term “intuition” in contemporary analytic philosophy. Its use may reflect the tacit influence of Evidence Neutrality.

That philosopher knew that if he had simply said that he weighed more than three pounds, rather than that he had an intuition that he weighed more than three pounds, he would have been accused of naively begging the question against those who identify persons with their brains. Their theory of personal identity may commit them to denying that he weighed more than three pounds, but not to denying the psychological claim that he had the intuition that he weighed more than three pounds. Thus he used the term “intuition” in an attempt to formulate a psychological premise, not directly about the subject matter of the dispute, which his opponents would concede. Had he been more artful, he might have said that his body weighed more than three pounds, and that he had the intuition that he weighed the same as his body, since they might have conceded both those premises too, and the latter “intuition” has a less empirical flavor.

<sup>3</sup> See Sinnott-Armstrong (1999) for some of the complexities. Naïve attempts to define “begging the question” typically count all deductively valid arguments as question-begging (if you reject the conclusion, you cannot consistently accept the premises).

The point of such maneuvers is primarily dialectical, to find common ground on which to argue with the opponent at hand. The rest of us can be still more confident that he weighed more than three pounds than that he had an intuition that he weighed more than three pounds – he had more chance of deceiving himself or others on the latter point than on the former. But even the dialectical value of such maneuvers is dubious. For if his opponents concede that he has the intuition, they will challenge him to argue from the occurrence of the intuition to its truth: how is he to do that? The simple premise that he weighs more than three pounds at least has the merit of bearing directly on the subject matter of the dispute. Nor need his opponents even concede that he has an intuition that he weighs more than three pounds. They may argue that he is reporting an intuition with some other content, or something other than an intuition.

“Intuition” plays a major role in contemporary analytic philosophy’s self-understanding. Yet there is no agreed or even popular account of how intuition works, no accepted explanation of the hoped-for correlation between our having an intuition that P and its being true that P. Since analytic philosophy prides itself on its rigor, this blank space in its foundations looks like a methodological scandal. Why should intuitions have any authority over the philosophical domain?

## 2

What are intuitions supposed to be, anyway? Let us start by considering a minimalist answer. For David Lewis, “Our ‘intuitions’ are simply opinions” (1983a: x). For Peter van Inwagen, “Our ‘intuitions’ are simply our beliefs – or perhaps, in some cases, the tendencies that make certain beliefs attractive to us, that ‘move’ us in the direction of accepting certain propositions without taking us all the way to acceptance” (1997: 309; he adds parenthetically “Philosophers call their philosophical beliefs intuitions because ‘intuition’ sounds more authoritative than ‘belief’”). If all beliefs or tendencies to belief count as intuitions, then reliance on intuitions is in no way distinctive of philosophy. No scientific progress can be made without reliance on some beliefs and tendencies to belief: simultaneous universal doubt is a dead-end.