

Act-centered Epistemic Conservatism and the Metaphysics of Belief[†]

Marc A. Moffett

[Draft 02/04/10—Do Not Cite]

In this paper I advance three theses: (i) that epistemic conservatism is best understood, in the first instance, as a thesis about doxastic *actions* rather than doxastic *states*; (ii) that so understood epistemic conservatism is the most defensible epistemic principle governing acts of *passive belief retention* (roughly, the inertial act of retaining a standing belief in the absence of further epistemic deliberation concerning it);¹ and (iii) that one can make sense of this result in terms of the basic metaphysics of belief as an epistemically valuable state. (As a corollary, I argue that the justification-conferring power of belief states is fundamentally different from the justification conferring power of evidentiary states like phenomenal or intellectual seemings in that they (beliefs) confer justification without providing reasons.) Finally, I argue that the resulting picture tends to reduce the importance (or epistemic centrality) of the corresponding state-level attributions, including knowledge attributions.

1. *The Units of Epistemic Evaluation*

A long tradition in core epistemology is primarily concerned with the concept of justification insofar as it bears on the nature of knowledge.² Knowledge, in turn, is understood to be a certain sort of cognitive state (e.g., a certain sort of belief state). Consequently, on this way of framing the core issues, the basic units of epistemic evaluation are cognitive states. In this sense, we can say that traditional epistemology is *state-centered*.

While there may ultimately be nothing wrong with state-centered epistemology at a certain level of generality, this traditional focus is not without consequences. We tend to think of states (at least paradigmatically) as temporally extended entities which persist over relatively prolonged stretches of time.

[†] Versions of this paper have been presented at the *Canadian Society for Epistemology Symposium on Rationality*, the 35th annual meeting of the *Society of Exact Philosophy*, the *Bellingham Summer Philosophy Conference*, the University of Texas *Symposium on Philosophical Methodology*, the University of Wyoming, Colorado State University and McGill University. The author would like to thank those audiences for helpful comments as well as Yuval Avnur, John Bengson, Juan Comesaña, Franz-Peter Griesmaier, Daniel Korman, Jeff Lockwood, and Jen Wright.

¹ I assume that relying on or otherwise making use of a belief without deliberation involves an act of passive belief retention.

² Throughout, the intention is to use justification and its cognates in its “pre-philosophical” epistemic usage.

One natural, though not inevitable, consequence is that our epistemic evaluation of cognitive states tends also to be historical in nature. After all, if states are paradigmatically conceptualized as temporally extended entities, it seems sensible to look at “the whole thing” in order to determine whether or not it has a given property (or, at least, some reasonably long temporal stretch to make the resulting part fit comfortably within the paradigm). To put this point in the idiom of cognitive linguistics, “state talk” invokes a semantic frame (Fillmore XXX) which brings with it specific ways of conceptualizing the issue, specifically, in terms of temporal extension.

My purpose at the moment is not so much to attack state-centered epistemology as to simply shift the focus to an *act-centered* framework which takes the basic units of epistemic evaluation to be cognitive acts. There are at least three doxastic actions in which an agent might engage: (i) the act of *forming* a belief, (ii) the act of *passive belief retention* (correlatively: *utilizing* or *acting on the basis of*) a previously formed belief, and (iii) the act of *active belief retention* a previously formed belief in light of incoming evidence.³ It makes perfectly good pre-philosophical sense to ask whether or not an individual engaged in any one of these acts is justified in so acting. It appears, therefore, that in addition to (propositional and doxastic) state-level justification,⁴ we want to distinguish a sense of epistemic justification which applies to doxastic actions. I will call this sense of “justification”, *praxic justification*, to distinguish it from the traditional, state-centered concept (which might be called *static justification*).⁵

Of course, it is immensely plausible that there are direct connections between act- and state-centered epistemology (and so between praxic and static justification). In particular, it is at least initially plausible that praxic justification is more basic than static justification in the sense that the static justification of a given belief state b at t is at least partially determined by (or grounded in) the epistemic

³ I assume that, unless otherwise specified, relying on or otherwise making use of a belief without deliberation involves an act of passive belief retention.

⁴ The basic distinction is between an individual’s possessing adequate reasons for believing some proposition (whether or not she “makes use of” those reasons) and an individual’s believing a proposition *on the basis of* such reasons.

⁵ The distinction between doxastic and propositional justification is orthogonal to the distinction between praxic and static justification. Or, at least, one could draw a parallel distinction for cognitive acts: having adequate reasons for performing a given act and performing the act on the basis of such reasons.

status of acts the believer has performed or could perform at or before t .⁶ Even accepting this, however, it should be clear that there are still a number of possible ways of connecting these two levels depending on which doxastic actions one takes to be relevant to evaluating the epistemic properties of the state at any given time. For instance, amending Michael Huemer's (2005) dualistic theory to the present framework, we get the following: x 's belief that p at t is (doxastically) justified iff x was justified in forming this belief and has been justified in retaining it until t . An alternative would be to say that x 's belief that p at t is (doxastically) justified iff either x is/would be justified in forming this belief at t or x is/would be justified in retaining it at t . I will return to these issues again in the final section. But for now, I simply want to emphasize the plausibility of an independent investigation into the nature of praxic justification.

Before proceeding, it is worth making one further point: it is far from obvious that there is a uniform, non-disjunctivist account of the epistemic properties of the various action types identified earlier. That is, from the point of view of act-centered epistemology, there are three central problems corresponding to the three types of doxastic action. First, there is the question of when one is justified in forming a belief. We can call this *the formation problem*. Second, there is the question of when one is justified in relying on or otherwise passively retaining a standing belief. I will call this *the retention problem*. And finally, there is the question of when one is justified in retaining or revising a belief in light of incoming evidence (*the revision problem*).

It is clear that these three problems are conceptually distinct; asking what one must do in order to justifiably form a belief is different from asking what one must do in order to (passively) retain a belief one already has. Nevertheless, the philosophical and practical importance of the too-often-neglected retention problem may be driven home by considering the following argument, which I will, hereafter, refer to as the Red Queen Problem (RQP):

⁶ One way of construing this claim is to say that the so-called "basing relation" is best understood in the first instance as a relation between belief states and various doxastic acts.

A more radical idea would be to divorce the two notions of justification altogether; thus, abandoning any dependence relation between praxic and static justification. For instance, one might opt for an internalist theory of praxic justification and an independent externalist theory of static justification. David Sosa (2005) opts for something like this solution, though his focus is on agent-justification rather than praxic justification.

1. We can make justifiable progress in our theoretical understanding of the world at t only if we can justifiably make inferences at t from standing beliefs (i.e., current beliefs formed at some past time).⁷
2. x can be justified at t in coming to believe a proposition p which x infers from some set Γ of beliefs (each of which is required for the inference) only if x is justified in relying on each belief in Γ at t .
3. Therefore, we can make justifiable progress in our theoretical understanding of the world at t only if we are justified in relying on our standing beliefs at t .

But surely if in order to be justified in relying on our standing beliefs at t we had to effectively re-evaluate those beliefs, our capacity to make rational progress in our understanding of the world would be dramatically hindered since we would be constantly committing our limited cognitive resources to problems which we have already addressed. Epistemically speaking, we would be “running as fast as we can just to stay in the same place.” In fact, insofar as our theoretical understanding aspires to comprehensiveness, re-evaluating all relevant standing beliefs would make anything like a justified comprehensive worldview practically impossible: we could make progress only by failing to discharge our epistemic duties (viz., by failing to re-verify all relevant standing beliefs) and we could discharge our epistemic duties only by stifling further development. An especially pernicious form of skepticism looms.

The RQP highlights the central role that epistemic (not to mention doxastic) stability play in our cognitive lives. This concern for stability has a significant influence on the structure of (praxic) epistemology. Specifically, as I will now argue that it entails a form of epistemic disjunctivism.

2. Epistemic Disjunctivism

I will for the most part assume that traditional internalist foundationalism is the correct approach to the formation problem. And while I believe that this is the most defensible view, this is not the place to engage that debate in detail. However, it is worth noting that some of the main concerns about traditional

⁷ By “we can make justifiable progress in our theoretical understanding of the world” I mean that we can develop or extend our theoretical understanding of the world and be justified in believing these developments/extensions. Premise one simply reflects the obvious fact that our theoretical understanding of the world develops cumulatively and progressively over time.

internalism bear primarily on the question of belief retention; internalism about belief formation is much less controversial.⁸ Specifically, the main concern recent epistemologists have had with epistemic internalism as a general thesis is that it cannot give an adequate solution to the retention problem. The reasoning here turns on the observation that paradigm cases of justification in the context of belief formation look immensely implausible in the context of belief retention. From the current act-centered point of view, this observation can be re-couched as the observation that there is no univocal solution to both the formation and the retention problems within the framework of internalist foundationalism.

Following Harman's lead (1995), let me spell this out more precisely. As a solution to the formation problem, internalist foundationalism may be stated as the following thesis:

x is (praxically) justified in forming the belief that *p* at *t* iff either *p* is a current undefeated deliverance from one of *x*'s basic sources of evidence or *p* is appropriately derived by *x* at *t* from propositions *x* is justified in believing at *t*.⁹

When formulated in this way, special foundationalism clearly presupposes some solution to the retention problem, for we are sometimes justified in forming new beliefs on the basis of inferences from standing beliefs. But this will be permissible only if we are justified in relying on those beliefs.

If our goal is to give a univocal solution to both problems, then we will have to give something like the following analysis of what it is to be justified in (passively) retaining one of our standing beliefs:

x is justified in (passively) retaining her standing belief that *p* at *t* iff *x would be* justified in forming the belief that *p* at *t*, if *x* did not already believe it.

⁸ Conversely, many of the most important concerns about externalism, e.g., Bonjour's (1980) clairvoyance examples and Lehrer and Cohen's New Evil Demon Problem (1983), bear primarily on that thesis as a thesis about belief formation.

⁹ Our basic sources of evidence are those sources of evidence which are modally reliable, namely, rational intuition and phenomenal experience (Bealer 2000). I take it that it is intrinsic to our basic sources of evidence that we recognize (at least implicitly) that we are warranted in accepting their deliverances. Such deliverances just *seem* to us, not merely true, but justifying; that is, they seem to us to be reasons. Consider, for example, the fact that even philosophers, who for various theoretical reasons deny the evidential significance of intuitions, nevertheless find themselves justified in rejecting the traditional analysis of knowledge on the basis of the Gettier intuitions. Thus, the view on offer here should not be confused with Burge's (1993) notion of entitlement, which is explicitly externalist: an entitlement is an epistemic right to accept a proposition the ground for which need not be accessible to the subject. I critically discuss Burge's view in §3 and revisit the evidential status of seemings in §4.

Plugging in to the preceding definition yields the following:

x is justified in forming the belief that p at t iff either p is a current undefeated deliverance from one of x 's basic sources of evidence or p is appropriately derived by x at t from propositions x is or would be justified in coming to believe at t if x did not already believe them.

As the reader can check, this condition is satisfied only when x *currently* has available adequate resources from her basic sources of evidence to justify her in effectively re-forming those beliefs on which she relies. Call beliefs which can be justified to the standards of belief formation on the basis of one's basic evidence *well-grounded*. Then special foundationalism entails the following claim:

x is justified in forming at t a belief that p on the basis of a set of beliefs Γ only if each $b \in \Gamma$ is well-grounded for x at t .

In fact, the problem is much worse than this way of motivating the problem suggests. After all, if, as seems plausible, any moment at which I do not discard a belief I am maintaining it, then I would need to satisfy the well-groundedness constraint for *all* of my standing beliefs, and not merely those which I am currently pressing into service.

But this commitment to the well-groundedness of our standing beliefs makes special foundationalism hopelessly unrealistic, for we do not generally have, and probably could not generally have, adequate justifying reasons of this sort for most of our standing beliefs (Harman 1995). The primary concern is that a general well-groundedness condition would require us to possess such a vast amount of basic evidence at each moment that our cognitive systems (memory, processing) would simply be overloaded. In light of these considerations it would appear that special foundationalism ultimately falls back into the clutches of some version of the Red Queen Problem.

There is, however, an important (though, I think, ultimately unworkable) response to this sort of cognitive overload argument. Instead of having a host of different reasons for each of my standing beliefs, I might just have a single *generic* reason which covers them all. In particular, I might have a single, well-grounded belief that I am a generally responsible doxastic agent. This belief coupled with my belief that p , gives me a reason to continue to believe that p (*cf.* Christensen 1994). Call this version of foundationalism,

generic foundationalism.¹⁰ Strictly speaking, generic foundationalism doesn't provide a univocal solution to both the formation and retention problems since the generic reasoning involved in belief retention depends essentially on the belief's already having been formed. Nevertheless the two are sufficiently similar that it is worth treating them together here. GF isn't subject to Harman-style cognitive overload arguments, since it doesn't require that we carry along an excessively large amount of justification-conferring baggage.

However, we must be careful to distinguish between generic foundationalism, which requires that we have at each moment a positive reason for believing that we are doxastically responsible which grounds out in our current basic evidence, and the claim that we not have any reason for thinking that we are doxastically *ir*responsible. Only the former claim contravenes epistemic conservatism. With this distinction in mind we can see that, while generic foundationalism avoids Harman's cognitive overload objection, it is nevertheless a relatively demanding from a cognitive perspective. After all, it would be a non-trivial, perhaps even a significant, intellectual achievement to be able to establish that one is doxastically responsible from one's current basic evidence. It is by no means clear to me that most adult human beings with no special training could achieve this. Nevertheless, I think it would be quite implausible to deny that most adult human beings are unjustified in retaining their standing beliefs.

GF is overly cognitively demanding in a second way as well: it requires that any being which is epistemically justified in relying on or retaining its standing beliefs is able to engage in meta-reflection on its own cognitive and epistemic abilities. This condition seems implausibly strong. There are good reasons to think that beliefs can occur in organisms (e.g., young children and some animals) that are simply insufficiently capable of this degree of meta-evaluation (Allen & Bekoff 1997, 156–158). Some such organisms, however, are sufficiently cognitively sophisticated that it makes sense to evaluate them from an epistemic point of view. If this is correct, then generic foundationalism is a non-starter.

In response to this failure, Harman urges us to adopt a conservative epistemological framework. According to Harman, "[T]he burden of proof is always on changing beliefs or intentions. You start with

¹⁰ It is important not to confuse generic foundationalism with what Harman calls general foundationalism. General foundationalism is a form of epistemic conservatism; generic foundationalism, is not. The relationship between the two is taken up in the next paragraph and again in the next section.

certain beliefs and intentions and any change in them requires some special reason” (1999, 27). Though Harman is not explicit about the distinction between praxic and static justification drawn above, it seems clear from passages such as this that he is thinking of conservatism primarily as a thesis about certain, specific doxastic acts, the acts of retaining or abandoning beliefs. Specifically, he seems to be claiming that we would not be (praxically) justified in abandoning a belief unless one had a special reason to do so. Although I believe that this principle might very well be true, I wish to focus on a weaker version of epistemic conservatism, namely, the positive thesis that that one is justified in maintaining any belief one does not have special reason to abandon.¹¹ More explicitly, the thesis I wish to consider is the following:

[EC] For any individual x and proposition p , x 's (passively) retaining the belief that p at t is prima facie, praxically justified if and only if x believes that p at t .¹²

[EC] is an explicitly act-centered version of epistemic conservatism formulated as a principle of belief retention.

[EC] gives us a straightforward account of which of our standing beliefs are prima facie justified in relying on in a way that avoids the Red Queen Problem. Unfortunately, the corresponding formation principle has no plausibility whatsoever:

[EC_f] For any individual x and proposition p , x 's forming the belief that p at t is prima facie, praxically justified if and only if x believes that p at t .

To the extent we can even make sense of its application to the formation problem, such a view would entail the claim that one is prima facie justified in forming a belief only if one already has it! Needless to say, this seems pretty clearly wrong.¹³

¹¹ This thesis is weaker because it does not claim that one would be *un*justified in abandoning a belief without special reason; it leaves open the possibility that either course of action is justified. Thus it does not entail Harman's claim. By contrast, if Harman's claim is true, then it entails the positive thesis; for if one is unjustified in abandoning a given belief, it would seem to follow that one is justified in retaining it.

¹² Reading [EC] in such a way that the left-to-right direction is trivial: if x does, in fact, retain her belief that p , then she believes that p .

¹³ In their generally illuminating book, Pollock & Cruz (1999) fail to adequately mark the distinctness of the two problems of retention and formation in their criticism of Harman; or, rather, they fail note that different epistemic norms might govern belief formation and belief retention.

It should be noted here that, even though [EC] is a very natural formulation of the sort of principle that theorists like Harman have in mind, it is not susceptible to some of the standard objections to generic, state-centered formulations of epistemic conservatism. Consider, for instance, Foley's (1993) well-known argument. Suppose that I have some evidence which supports the truth of p but is marginally less than what would be required to justify me in believing that p . Let the amount of additional justificatory support needed be δ and let δ also be the amount of justificatory support which the conservative thinks is "provided by" believing itself. Then we can have a situation in which, while I am clearly not justified in believing that p , the mere fact that I went ahead and formed the belief anyway bootstraps me into being justified in my belief.

But note that a Foley-style objection has no bite whatsoever against [EC], for the argument relies essentially on the claim that some amount of positive justification (reasons, evidence) is required for a belief to count as justified. This claim is intuitively very plausible as a general principle of belief formation. But the correlative principle concerning belief retention has no intuitive purchase of this sort. Indeed, there is no way of even stating such a principle which does not flatly beg the question against [EC]. For, according to [EC], *no amount* of evidence is required for being *prima facie* justified in maintaining a standing belief. The right thing to say about Foley's case, considered purely from an act-centered perspective, is that it is a case in which the individual is not justified in *forming* the belief because she has inadequate evidence but is, thereafter, justified (we may grant) in *retaining* the belief.¹⁴ So understood, no problematic bootstrapping occurs. Here, the fine-grainedness of act-centered epistemology pays dividends.

In concluding this section, it is worth emphasizing again that acceptance of this act-centered principle does *not* commit one to any particular view about the corresponding state-level conservative principle:

[EC_{state}] For any individual x and proposition p , x 's belief that p is *prima facie* (doxastically) justified at t if and only if x believes that p at t .

¹⁴ I am assuming here a description of the case in which the circumstances of belief formation are immediately lost so as not to provide an immediate undercutting of the belief.

After all, [EC] is a principle governing the epistemic rationality of a certain class of intellectual actions, whereas [EC_{state}] is a principle governing the epistemic status of the states which result from those actions. And while I believe that a surprisingly strong defense of [EC_{state}] can be mounted, it is [EC] that has been the primary concern of conservatives.

Stepping back a little, one moral we can draw from the preceding discussion is that there is no univocal solution to both the retention problem and the formation problem. Instead, the sorts of epistemic principles governing these acts are complementary. On the one hand, the epistemic demands for justified belief formation appear to be relatively high in the sense that one intuitively needs adequate reasons/evidence for forming a given belief; on the other hand, the epistemic demands for justified belief retention are relatively low, lower even than those provided by generic foundationalism. This makes good “engineering” sense. If one is relatively careful in forming beliefs, one can afford to be relatively lax in retaining them. Conversely, one can afford to be relatively careful in forming beliefs only if one is relatively lax in retaining them (since the cost of re-forming/re-verifying those beliefs is prohibitively high). Even if this is so, however, we are not yet in a position to endorse epistemic conservatism, for there is one other weak epistemic competitor, namely, epistemic preservationism.

3. Against Epistemic Preservationism

There are, broadly speaking, two basic approaches to the retention problem. On the one hand, we could be justified in retaining our standing beliefs in virtue of certain historical properties of those beliefs. The most natural and widely defended historical thesis is *epistemic preservationism*:

[EP] For any individual x and belief b for which x does not currently have an adequate set of justifying reasons, x is prima facie justified in retaining b if and only if x was justified in forming b and this justification has not, in the meantime, been defeated (*cf.* Burge 1993).¹⁵

¹⁵ For ease of exposition, I am putting to one side such obvious caveats as “or (ii) x has acquired an adequate set of justifying reasons after having formed b and this justification has not been defeated.”

According to [EP], epistemic origins matter to the justificatory status of acts of belief retention; in effect, you can't be justified in retaining a belief that you weren't justified in forming (barring some intervening epistemic episode).

Alternatively, it could be that we are justified in retaining our standing beliefs in virtue of certain ahistorical properties of those beliefs. Call such ahistorical views *epistemically generative*. All epistemically generative theories have in common a commitment to the claim that we are prima facie justified in maintaining our standing beliefs, even those for which we have never had an adequate set of direct justifying reasons. On this usage, generic foundationalism, according to which our standing beliefs are (one and all) prima facie, indirectly justified in virtue of a general belief in our doxastic reliability, is epistemically generative.¹⁶ After all, on this view, the one generic reason supports all of my beliefs indiscriminately, no matter how dark their epistemic histories. However, as we have already seen, there are reasons to think that this view is mistaken.

The other salient generative thesis is *epistemic conservatism*, repeated below:

[EC] For any individual x and proposition p , x 's maintaining the belief that p at t is prima facie, practically justified if and only if x believes that p at t .

According to [EC], the ahistorical property in virtue of which the retention of our standing beliefs is justified is simply the property of being a belief itself. (I will consider in §3 some of the metaphysical underpinnings of this claim.)

Surely upon initial consideration, epistemic preservationism is the more plausible of the two theses. For it holds that semantic memory simply preserves one's initial justifications; justification is neither created nor destroyed, but simply passed along. Epistemic conservatism, by contrast, seems to generate justification *ex nihilo* (as it were) since the retention of all beliefs, even epistemically malformed beliefs, is prima facie justified. (Indeed, it is interesting to note that the concern about justification *ex nihilo* crosscuts the preservationist/generativist distinction since generic foundationalism does not appear to be open to this charge.) This probably explains why many philosophers who might otherwise be tempted by

¹⁶ I don't have anything fancy in mind in saying that some justifications are "direct" and others "indirect". The distinction here is, I think, pretty intuitive. As far as I can tell, nothing much hinges on the issue.

conservatism feel the need to offer something like generic foundationalism instead in order to give some account of “where the justification comes from.”¹⁷ (And, of course, epistemic conservatism acknowledges that a belief is not justified if one is aware that it was malformed or inappropriately retained, since in such a case any presumption in favor of the belief is immediately undercut. Nevertheless, it allows that epistemically malformed beliefs, once formed, enjoy the same justificatory status as beliefs whose initial evidentiary status is unproblematic.)

Despite its greater superficial appeal, however, epistemic preservationism is open to counterexamples to which epistemic conservatism is immune. To begin with, note that when everything is epistemically normal with respect to belief formation, revision and retention, [EC] and [EP] are equivalent. For in such cases, all of one’s standing beliefs will have been justified when they were formed. In such a case, the set of standing beliefs and the set of appropriately formed and retained standing beliefs are the same set. So [EC] and [EP] come apart only under conditions in which some of our beliefs are epistemically malformed or inappropriately retained.¹⁸ The crucial cases are those in which a given belief is epistemically malformed. In such cases, [EP] implies that the resulting belief is not *prima facie* justified while [EC] implies that it is.

With this in mind, consider the following example:

Holmes is investigating a murder in which the victim was strangled. Given his current evidence E, Holmes has established that the murderer must be either, Smith or Jones. The evidence at his disposal, however, favors neither suspect. On his way home to #5 Baker Street that afternoon, an Evil Demon causes Holmes to form the non-occurrent belief that there were strands of red hair in the victim’s clenched hands. Still later, while mulling over the evidence, he comes upon this new demon-induced belief. Mildly surprised that he had originally neglected this piece of evidence,

¹⁷ It will be my purpose in §4 to give a different account of the metaphysical underpinnings of this claim which is consistent with [EC].

¹⁸ In the case in which one is aware that a belief was malformed or inappropriately retained, [EC] and [EP] disagree over whether or not the belief is even *prima facie* justified. I take it that there is not enough of a difference between these two outcomes to make this the basis of a firm epistemically significant distinction between them.

Holmes immediately (and, from a logical point of view, appropriately) infers that Smith, who is the only suspect with red hair, is the murderer.¹⁹

Intuitively, Holmes is *prima facie* justified in believing that Smith is the murderer: given his epistemic situation, he believes precisely what he should believe.²⁰ Indeed, given his epistemic situation it would be flatly irrational not to believe that Smith was the murderer. At the same time, it also seems clear that the following is a general principle of inferential justification (premise two from the RQP above): *x* can be justified at *t* in coming to believe a proposition *p* which *x* infers from some set Γ of beliefs (each of which is required for the inference) only if *x* is justified in relying on each belief in Γ at *t*. Since Holmes is *prima facie* justified in forming the belief that Smith is the murderer and since this depends essentially on his demon-induced belief, it follows that he is *prima facie* justified in relying on the demon-induced belief as well. Thus, our concrete-case judgments appear to support [EC] over [EP].²¹

For the reasons given above, this is a surprising result. Why should we prefer conservatism, with its *ex nihilo* justification, to the seemingly more sensible preservationist principle? At least part of the answer, I believe, is that the gap is from a certain point of view much smaller than an abstract discussion of the principles suggests. The reason for this is that [EP] is an externalist principle in the sense that it simply characterizes some of our acts of retention as justified and others not in a way that is *indifferent to our ability to determine which is which*. This point is nicely captured by McGrath, “Preservationism wrongly separates the question of whether it is rational to abandon a belief from the question of whether abandoning

¹⁹ The intention here is that from Holmes’ subjective point of view there is nothing particularly suspicious about the demon-induced belief. He might think to himself, “You are slipping, old boy,” but there would be nothing in the mere fact that he realized that he had this belief to make him think it was anything but a run-of-the-mill belief which has slipped his mind.

Christensen (1994, 7) describes a case in which I flip a coin and it lands out of sight. Nonetheless, I form the belief that it came up tails. He (correctly) notes that, in this case, I would not be justified in this belief. But Christensen’s case is problematic, for it appears to presuppose a dubious degree of voluntary control over our beliefs (see §3 for discussion) and it fails to clearly distinguish cases in which a malformed belief is not *prima facie* justified and cases in which such justification is immediately swamped by obvious background information.

²⁰ It may be that Holmes’ belief, if true, could not thereby amount to knowledge. But since we already know that justified true belief does not entail knowledge, this gives us no reason to deny that Holmes’ belief is justified.

²¹ See McGrath (2007) for a different, though complimentary, line of argument.

it makes sense from one's current perspective. The preservationist must say that there are pairs of beliefs such that one rationally should be abandoned and the other rationally shouldn't, but that nothing in one's perspective favors doing one over the other" (2007, 22).

Once the externalist character of [EP] is made explicit, it becomes apparent that it is open to the same general types of arguments as traditional, state-centered externalism (e.g., the New Evil Demon Problem; Foley 1993). Consider, for example, the science-fiction movie *Total Recall*. In the movie, the character Douglas Quaid has had a complete set of false memories causally implanted and his own real memories erased. As a result, he has a large number of standing beliefs which were not justified at the point at which they were formed (like Holmes's belief above, they were simply caused in a deviant manner). Thus, Quaid's entire belief set was malformed. Consequently, [EP_m] predicts that Quaid is not justified in retaining any of his current standing beliefs. But this is implausible. After all, if the deception is sufficiently thorough, I might well be in Quaid's predicament; I might have just woken up for the first time this morning from such a procedure. But even if this is so, surely when I woke up this morning to come to campus, I was justified in relying on my belief that I am a professor of philosophy, that this is the way to campus from my house (and that is my house), that I am scheduled to teach at 12:00, and so on. Or, even more basically, surely I was justified in retaining (and acting on) my belief that I have hands, feet, and green eyes!

In conversation, David Sosa has suggested that our reactions to these examples might depend on the fact that the subjects in these examples are not themselves responsible for the malformed beliefs and that our intuitions might shift if they were re-described in such a way that they are. However, in my own case, the intuitions are unaffected by this change. Indeed, I think we can give quite compelling cases where an individual who has questionable epistemic practices and forms beliefs on those bases is stricken by amnesia about having employed these practices while retaining the suspect beliefs. In such cases, I think we will be equally inclined to say that the individual is justified post-amnesia in retaining and relying on those beliefs.

Furthermore, even if this were correct, the preservationist would still need some account of an individual's justification for retaining an implanted belief (it can't be that she was justified in forming the

belief, since she performed no such act). One possibility would be to follow Huemer (1999, 352) where it is suggested that in these sorts of cases the offending belief was “acquired through apparent memory.” This strikes me as simply a mischaracterization of the origins of the belief; apparent memory is not a way of forming a belief. But even if it were a way of forming a belief, it is *not* an acceptable way of *forming* a belief; the belief remains epistemically malformed. Consequently, it is unclear that the preservationist can avail himself of this strategy.²²

There is, however, a more subtle way of invoking apparent memory which would result in an evidentialist version of conservatism (or, at least, non-preservationism).²³ Here is the idea. Many philosophers take some class of *seemings* to be part of our basic evidence. Obvious candidates include phenomenal seemings and intuitions (i.e., intellectual seemings). Given this, one might maintain that there is a certain sort of seeming, call it a memorial seeming, associated with each of our standing beliefs which is governed by something like Michael Huemer’s (2001, 2007) principle of (compassionate) phenomenal conservatism:

[PC] For any x and p , if it seems true to x that p , then x is prima facie justified in forming or retaining the belief that p .²⁴

The idea would be that there is an epistemically significant (or evidential) sense in which all of my standing beliefs seem true to me. The conjunction of evidentialism and phenomenal conservatism entails the thesis

²² Huemer himself is not interested in defending preservationism (though his own dualistic theory is, in my view, just a version of that theory; see §5). Nevertheless, it seems to me that he is arguing at cross purposes. For, if one were to accept his thesis that apparent memory is an acceptable way of coming to form a belief, the preservationist would by his own lights have an acceptable response to implanted belief cases.

²³ Evidentialism is the thesis that, for any individual x and proposition p , x is prima facie justified in believing that p iff x has evidence for the truth of p (see Conee & Feldman, 2004 for further discussion). Thanks to Juan Comesaña for discussion on this issue.

²⁴ It is unclear (at least to me) whether or not Huemer himself accepts this sort of view. On the one hand, he does take apparent factual memory to be a form of epistemically significant seeming (though he explicitly distinguishes this from belief in a way that denies a one-one correspondence); on the other hand, he wants to “identify a special class of foundational beliefs, to be distinguished from merely arbitrary beliefs” (2001, 99). These desiderata appear to conflict. But perhaps the best reading of the text is that Huemer rejects the claim that all epistemically significant seemings constitute *evidence*. If this is so then the differences between Huemer’s view and my own are quite small. In effect, I prefer to treat seemings as strictly evidential and so opt instead for a more traditional form of epistemic conservatism.

that seemings of the relevant sort count as evidence. Call this view evidentialist phenomenal conservatism [EPC].

[EPC] For any x and p , if it seems true to x that p , then x has some evidence for p .

When [EPC] is combined with the thesis that there exist appropriate memorial seemings for each of our standing beliefs, we get the result that we will always have at least some weak evidence for all of our standing beliefs. The result is an evidentialist version of *epistemic* conservatism. In many respects this would be a highly desirable result since it would provide a relatively orthodox epistemic ground for a broadly conservative epistemology. In particular, it would provide a relatively elegant solution to the problem of justification *ex nihilo*.

Unfortunately, I believe that there are substantial problems with such a proposal. Specifically, I believe that the posited class of memorial seemings is not philosophically tenable. This is not to deny that it is often correct for me to say with respect to a given belief that it seems to me that such-and-such. In some cases, this use of “seems” is intended to indicate that some proposition is supported (or best supported) by the current body of evidence, perhaps while acknowledging that this situation may change. In such cases, while there is a genuine evidential seeming being invoked, it is *not* taken to constitute evidence for the “target” proposition. Instead, what seems to us is that a certain relation of evidential support holds between our evidence and the target proposition. A second, standard use of “seems” in these contexts is to indicate uncertainty or, more accurately, less certainty than would be normally assumed. This hedging usage is not intended to indicate that the seeming itself is evidence, though the fact that I am inclined to respond this way might be a weak form of evidence (which is why I report it).

The evidential use of “seems”, by contrast, is one in which the seeming *itself* constitutes basic evidence for the content of the seemings and so constitutes a *prima facie* reason for belief. Arguably, this class of seemings has something like the following characteristics:

- i. The contents of the seeming present themselves as true or as obtaining (Bealer 1992).
- ii. The seemings present their contents as *prima facie* justified in virtue of condition (i) (e.g., Ewing 1953).

Condition (i) should be carefully distinguished from the superficially similar claim that the seemings present their contents as true. The latter condition is *purely* phenomenological in the sense that it does not specify a prima facie world-to-mind direction of influence. In the case of seemings which conform to condition (i), however, the apparent truth of the content is imposed from without. Thus, condition (i) specifies what might be thought of as an “externality constraint” on evidential seemings. The difference is important because satisfaction of the externality constraint provides the backbone of an account of how phenomenology could be a guide to reality.²⁵

In the vast majority of cases involving our standing beliefs, there is no associated seeming which satisfies either condition (i) or condition (ii), much less both. This is not surprising. But since we can have beliefs about arbitrary propositions, the posited class of seemings would have to involve arbitrary propositions as well. It is not plausible, however, that we do (or even could) stand in this sort of epistemic relation to just any given proposition.

The problem, in effect, is that belief is a more promiscuous relation than evidential seeming. Even if one objects to the above characterization of evidential seemings, this claim is independently plausible. One way of seeing this is to note that we have many standing beliefs which nevertheless seem (in a weak, phenomenological sense) false. For instance, I believe many strange and unusual things on the basis of my understanding of quantum theory and general relativity. Nevertheless, the overriding phenomenology is that they strike me as false; they are, in a colloquial sense, counterintuitive.

I conclude that we should reject the posited class of memorial seemings and with it the hope for an evidentialist version of epistemic conservatism. Moreover, in light of these considerations, I suspect that something like what I say in section 3 will be required to account for such cases. And if so, the preservationist will be hard pressed to explain why the same account doesn't hold for routine cases of malformed beliefs as well.

The upshot of this discussion is that, from a first-person point of view, preservationist justification (being an externalist theory) is doing no work in governing our actions, doxastic or otherwise. This is a

²⁵ For instance, in the case of intellectual seemings, satisfaction of externality constraint is most plausibly explained in terms of the nature of the content of the state together with the subject's grasp of the associated concepts (Peacocke 2000).

feature of externalist theories generally (Pollock 1987). It is only when we shift to a third-person, objective point of view that the worry about justification *ex nihilo* gains any traction. This makes explicit that the concern is not a concern (as one might expect) about our cognitive *access* to some praxic justification in practical reasoning and action, but about the metaphysical *origins* of such justifications. If this is the correct way of locating the problem, we can more readily inquire what might be done to dispel it. It is to this project to which I now turn.

4. Conservatism and the Metaphysics of Belief

The metaphysical problem of justification *ex nihilo* for conservatism is reminiscent of a familiar epistemic problem, the problem of self-justifying beliefs. Of course, in the context of act-centered epistemology, the basic metaphysical structure is importantly different than in the state-centered case: we are not asking how a belief confers justification on itself, but rather how a belief confers justification on the *act* of maintaining it. It is a further, and at this point still open, question whether or not the justificatory status of this act reflects back on the belief state (see §1).

In order to motivate my proposal, let me turn for a moment to some remarks made by Chisholm about state-level conservatism. He writes:

Anything we find ourselves believing may be said to have some [epistemic] presumption in its favor [simply in virtue of its being believed]—provided that it is not explicitly contradicted by the set of other things we believe (1980, x; brackets added by author) .

So according to Chisholm, the mere fact that one finds oneself believing something confers on the proposition believed (and/or the belief itself) some degree of positive epistemic standing. This is, of course, very different from many other propositional attitudes one might have. There is no temptation, for instance, to say that the mere fact that one finds oneself wondering whether or not something is true confers on that proposition some degree of positive epistemic standing.²⁶ One natural way of understanding Chisholm's

²⁶ Moreover, in other contexts this seems like a perfectly natural thing to say about belief. In the case of testimony, for instance, the mere fact that I find that *you* believe something confers on that proposition some degree of positive epistemic standing. Thanks to Jonathan Schaffer for helping me to see this point of connection. It is arguable that there is a unified story behind the ensuing remarks which accounts for the epistemology of both belief retention and testimony (something also suggested by Burge 1993). Nevertheless, I will not pursue that line of thought here.

remarks is to say that it is in the nature of beliefs that they are epistemically valuable; that is, beliefs are such that from an epistemic point of view they are presumptively desirable states to be in. I will call such states epistemic *pro-qualities*. If beliefs are epistemic pro-qualities, then we would have a very natural account of why we are (presumptively) justified in retaining any given belief.²⁷

But why think this? The answer, I submit, is that beliefs possess the following interrelated characteristics (*cf.*, Shah & Velleman 2005) or at least something very much like them:

- i. Agential belief states are mediated by judgment. The intention here is to deny extreme voluntarism concerning belief formation. Thus, even agential beliefs are *formed*, not chosen.²⁸
- ii. Beliefs are normatively regulated for truth in the sense that they are presumptively or ostensibly formed and retained on the basis of considerations regarding their truth.
- iii. Beliefs are correct if and only if they are true.

None of these proposed characteristics is entirely uncontroversial. While this is not the place to give a thorough defense of them, I will say a few words on their behalf.

Doxastic voluntarism (as I will understand it) is the thesis that it is possible to form a belief that *p* directly on the basis of a decision and in the absence of any associated judgment that *p* satisfies the correctness conditions for belief (Williams 1970). According to characteristic (i), doxastic voluntarism is mistaken. Agential beliefs arise from antecedent judgments, specifically from judgments as to the truth of the proposition believed (characteristic iii). Of course, insofar as judgments may be understood as

²⁷ An analogy might be helpful here. Consider the state of contentment. One might think that this state is a pro-quality from the point of view of well-being. This is not to say that being content is always a good thing for one's personal well-being. However, if one is content in one's life, there would presumably be something irrational about upending that state without reason.

²⁸ Agential belief states are those that are not (directly) caused. It is an interesting question as to which, if any, of our actual belief states are non-agential. Shah and Velleman (2005) suggest that perceptual beliefs are non-agential. This seems wrong. Typical perceptual beliefs require both an assessment of the veridicality of the perception and some degree of categorization. While such judgments may be more or less immediate and subconscious, they are nevertheless under conscious control. Consider, for example, the Müller-Lyre illusion. In this case, even though we cannot readily shake the illusion that the two lines are of equal length, we need not judge (and so need not believe) that they are. Similar remarks hold for beliefs based on intuition.

decisions, there is an extended sense in which one can decide to believe that p (Bach 1981). Thus, the denial of this strong notion of doxastic voluntarism need not interfere with the acceptance of weaker formulations of the thesis required for deontological epistemic theories (Shah 2002, Steup 1988). The present point is simply that agential belief is conceptually tied to judgments concerning their correctness.

Characteristic (ii) tells us that as a normative matter doxastic judgments (whether over belief formation or belief retention) involve consideration of epistemic properties. This is not to say that prudential or pragmatic considerations *cannot* figure into the belief formation (or retention) process; it is only to say that beliefs so generated (or retained) are malformed or deviant members of the type. Neither does it seem likely that “pragmatically-fixed” beliefs are, or even could be, commonplace (*pace* Kvanvig 2003). When wishful thinking or other non-epistemic factors play a role in the formation or retention of a belief, the norm is epistemic self-deception rather than a sober acceptance that the belief has a non-epistemic origin. And it seems wrong to say of someone who in general soberly accepts or retains propositions on the basis of obviously prudential considerations that the resulting cognitive states were genuinely belief states. Of course, we could isolate a more general class of propositional attitudes, call them acceptances, which do not have this feature (*cf.* Cohen 1992). But the class of mere acceptances (so-defined) is not plausibly governed by a principle of epistemic conservatism.

Features (i) and (ii) render the claim that belief is epistemically pro-quality highly plausible. In the absence of (i), there would be a residual worry over excessive pragmatic encroachment of an inappropriate sort into the process of belief formation; while in the absence of (ii), our compulsion to believe would not be properly epistemic (truth directed). Thus, together they suggest that it is in the nature of properly formed beliefs that the believer is epistemically compelled to judge that the proposition is true.

However, it is important to understand the way in which these observations figure into the justification of our doxastic actions. One way, the *wrong* way in my opinion, is to take beliefs to be justification-conferring because they provide *reasons* for maintaining them. On this way of understanding the situation, my reason for retaining a given belief is that I believe it. But this strikes me as thoroughly confused. In general, we don't have or need reasons for retaining our beliefs. What I am urging in lieu of this picture, is a metaphysical understanding of the situation: belief is such that, the *prima facie*

justifiedness of belief retention, *supervenes* on it. So understood the justificatory status of our routine acts of belief retention is epistemically, though not metaphysically, basic.²⁹

Before closing this section, let me return to the issue of evidential seemings. We argued above that a principle like [EPC] could not adequately account for the justificatory status of our standing beliefs. Even if this is so, however, it gives us no reason to reject [EPC] itself. Indeed, it is plausible that any adequate theory of evidential seemings will preserve [EPC]. If so, and if [EC] is accepted as well, then we get the following fundamental metaphysical contrast between (evidential) seemings and beliefs: seemings are justification conferring in virtue of the fact that they are evidence; but beliefs, as we have just seen, are justification conferring in virtue of being epistemic pro-qualities. It is this difference between the two states which accounts for the fact [EPC] has a role to play in an epistemological theory of belief formation, while [EC] does not.

5. *State-centered Epistemology Revisited*

To this point, I have argued in favor of an act-centered version of epistemic conservatism. If the argument is accepted, the conclusion is non-trivial since the result bears directly on how we evaluate persons as rational *agents*. Nevertheless, we saw from the discussion of the Red Queen Problem that a solution to the retention problem is necessary if we are to give a general account of the growth of *knowledge* over time, which suggests that the epistemic status of belief-retention acts bears on the epistemic status of the corresponding doxastic states. Intuitively, this is right. For, in the cases of doxastic action we have been considering, the *intended* consequence of my action is that I believe that *p*, either in virtue of forming or retaining this belief. But in general it would be odd if in every sense of ‘justification’, the intended consequences of my justified actions were not themselves justified (or, justifiable) by appeal to those actions. Conversely, it would be equally odd if my belief could have this type of justification and yet the corresponding doxastic actions be unjustified. A classic example of justification *ex nihilo!* Consequently, it

²⁹ *Pace* Christensen (2000), this way of accounting for epistemic conservatism does not violate any principle of epistemic impartiality. I am not justified in retaining my beliefs because they are *my* beliefs, but because they are *beliefs*. For this reason, the proposed account of epistemic conservatism might also shed light on the evidential basis of testimony. Moreover, I have reservations about the principle of epistemic impartiality itself (see Moffett 2007).

appears that praxic justification is both necessary sufficient for static (i.e., state-level) justification in at least one sense.³⁰

Even if this is correct, however, we are not yet in a position to adopt a version of classical, state-level conservatism, for we have not yet ruled out state-level preservationism. The two theses are given below:³¹

[EC_{state}] For any individual x and proposition p , x 's belief that p is prima facie justified at t if and only if x is praxically justified in retaining this belief at t .

[EP_{state}] For any individual x and proposition p , x 's belief that p is prima facie justified at t if and only if x was praxically justified in forming this belief and has been praxically justified in retaining it at all points up to and including t .

Like its act-level counterpart, [EP_{state}] is an externalist theory of justification, since I am not always (or even generally) in a position to ascertain if my beliefs were well-formed or appropriately retained. This fact, however, is seemingly less important in the present context since the operative notion of justification is not tied directly to action guiding norms.

The two theses do make subtly different predications about our knowledge attributions. In cases of malformed (or inappropriately retained) beliefs, [EP_{state}] says that the belief will not be justified. Consequently, the belief falls short of knowledge in virtue of failing to satisfy the justification condition. [EC_{state}] diagnoses the situation differently. It too denies that the belief constitutes knowledge, but from this perspective it is because the case involves epistemic luck. And while to my ear the latter sounds like the more plausible explanation, this hardly seems like a decisive consideration.

Perhaps a more pressing question is why philosophers should care about static justification? Once I come to understand the conditions under which it is appropriate to form, retain, and revise my beliefs, what more is to be gained by coming to understand, in addition, the conditions under which the belief itself

³⁰ There are really two issues in play here: (1) does praxic justification determine some notion of static justification and (2), if so, is this the sense of justification relevant to knowledge?

³¹ For simplicity, I put to one side such caveats as "for which x does not currently have an adequate set of justifying reasons."

is justified? That there is a philosophically significant state-level concept of justification is by no means obvious. Consider, for instance, an analogous point in philosophical ethics (Gibbard 1990):

It is clear enough why we should want a theory of what kinds of acts are [morally] right in the subjective sense. Such a theory offers moral guidance: even when we know we are ignorant of relevant facts, we can use the theory, together with what we think we do know, to decide what acts to avoid on moral grounds. Why, though, should we want a theory of what kinds of acts are right in the objective sense? Such a theory offers no guidance when we know we are ignorant of relevant facts; in that case we need rules for acting without full information. [And in cases where we do have full information] the theory [of objective rightness] is superfluous if we have criteria for rightness in the subjective sense, for in the case of full knowledge, the subjective and objective senses of ‘wrong’ coincide...” (43).

The point in both cases is that once we have exhausted the theory of rational or normative action, it is unclear what further work is being done by any additional normative concepts. In the case of belief, this raises the serious possibility of epistemic epiphenomenalism.³² Unfortunately, whether or to what extent this possibility needs to be taken seriously is a question that will have to be left for another occasion. For now, I simply note in closing that it is not obvious that much, if anything, of philosophical importance hangs on the which of the two state-level principles we accept.

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³² Of course, it will be rightly pointed out that according to a long tradition in epistemology, static justification serves as a gate keeper to knowledge. And for this reason alone the issue should not be settled lightly.

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