KEITH LEHRER ON THE BASING RELATION

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Abstract
In this paper, we review Keith Lehrer's account of the basing relation, with particular attention to the two cases he offered in support of his theory, Raco (Lehrer 1990 and 2000) and the earlier case of the superstitious lawyer (Lehrer 1971). We show that Lehrer's examples succeed in making his case that beliefs need not be based on the evidence, in order to be justified. Instead, these cases show that it is the justification (rather than the belief) that must be based in the evidence. We compare Lehrer's account of basing with some alternative accounts that have been offered, and show why Lehrer's own account is more plausible.

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1. Introduction

In order for one to know that something is true, must one's belief that it is true be *based on* the evidence one has for that belief? In other words, must one believe that something is true *because of* the evidence, or can one know that something is true even if the evidence does not explain how one came to hold the belief or why one actually now holds the belief? It is easy to imagine cases in which someone has entirely appropriate and adequate evidence for some belief, but actually holds the belief for some other reason. Most epistemologists have regarded such cases as failing to qualify as knowledge.

In order to answer these questions, we must first ask how we should understand the basing relation, and then ask whether or not that relation is required for justification and/or knowledge. Our focus in this paper will not be to complete a critical assessment of the first of these tasks, which in any case would be impossible within our space

limitations. Instead, we will discuss Marshall Swain's causal account of basing and Gilbert Harman's explanatory account, as samples of approaches different from Keith Lehrer's. We then compare these to Lehrer's account, which denies that, for knowledge, one's belief must be based on one's evidence. Several externalists have also rejected Lehrer's account of the basing relation, claiming either that it lacks intuitive appeal or that it places too heavy a burden on epistemic agents. In this paper, we defend Lehrer's view in the face of these competing theories and criticisms and attempt to revive its intuitive appeal while also emphasizing the appropriateness of the burden it places on epistemic agents.

2. Swain's Causal Connection between Warrant and Belief

Some contend that a causal connection between evidence and belief is necessary for knowledge. This causal connection can take two forms. On one account of the causal connection, the evidence that prompts the original production of the belief presents the appropriate relationship to the belief. An alternate account requires evidence to sustain the belief, and not simply be responsible for its origin. Swain (1981) combines these two features in his account of warrant. Swain argues that causation is necessary for a belief to be warranted. A belief is appropriately warranted by a piece of evidence if the evidence and the belief are part of the same causal chain, or if the evidence is a genuine overdeterminant of another piece of evidence for the same belief, such that both are sufficient causes for the belief to occur.

However, these requirements alone are susceptible to two counterexamples introduced to the literature by Lehrer. In *Theory of Knowledge*, Lehrer asks us to imagine a man named Raco, who believes that members of a certain race are susceptible

to a particular disease while members of his own race are not susceptible (Lehrer 1990, 169-171 and 2000, 196-197). This belief is entirely caused by Raco's prejudices. If Raco did not have this set of prejudices, he would not have the belief, and it is precisely *because* Raco has these prejudices that he believes that members of the other race are susceptible to the disease. However, later in life, Raco becomes a doctor and, after a considerable amount of research, discovers medical evidence supporting his belief. He both understands and appreciates this evidence. The evidence Raco acquires is *independent* of the process by which he comes to hold his belief—and Lehrer builds the case in such a way that Raco would also continue to hold his racist belief even if it was disconfirmed by subsequent medical studies. On Swain's account of the basing relation, Raco must be counted as not knowing what he believes about the other race and its susceptibility to the disease—even though he has confirmed his belief with sound medical evidence that he appreciates! This seems counter-intuitive.

The Raco case is similar to an earlier thought experiment of Lehrer's (Lehrer 1971). In this case, a substantial amount of evidence indicated that a lawyer's client committed eight murders. This evidence was sufficient to convince everyone, including the lawyer, that the client killed eight people. However, the lawyer consulted his tarot cards, in which he had complete and total confidence. His reading of the cards indicated that his client, though he committed seven of the murders, was innocent of the eighth. Because of his faith in tarot cards, the lawyer began to believe in his client's innocence. And because of this belief, he re-examined the evidence and uncovered several facts proving his client's innocence of the eighth murder. However, had the lawyer not consulted his tarot cards, he would have believed that the client murdered all eight

victims. Only because the lawyer trusted the tarot cards did he come to believe in his client's innocence. Nonetheless, given that the lawyer uncovered substantial evidence supporting his belief, and fully appreciated this evidence, it seems reasonable to believe that the lawyer was ultimately justified in his belief in his client's innocence. But again, we cannot explain what justifies the lawyer's belief in terms of the processes by which he came to hold that belief, or even in terms of what eventually sustained that belief—for the lawyer would have continued to believe in the client's innocence of the eighth murder simply based on his reading of the tarot cards.

Not everyone agrees with Lehrer's intuition in these cases. Alvin Goldman (1979, 22) objects: "...I find this example unconvincing. To the extent that I clearly imagine that the lawyer fixes his belief solely as a result of the cards, it seems intuitively wrong to say that he *knows* — or has a *justified belief* — that his client is innocent." But, in thinking about these cases, we must also imagine the full extent to which Raco and the lawyer accept the respective justifying warrants. Imagine Raco giving a talk at a medical conference. He will be able to explain the medical research articulately and accurately and explain exactly how it justifies the belief that members of the relevant racial group are more susceptible to the disease than others are. Similarly, imagine the lawyer making his closing remarks to the jury. He will be so well-versed in the exonerating facts that he will be able to convince even the most prejudiced of jurors. Anyone in the audience or jury box will be convinced that the two are justified in their beliefs. We are inclined to agree with their assessment.

To account for such cases, Swain introduces what he calls pseudo-overdeterminant causes. In other words, if the actual cause were not to occur then the

counterfactual cause would be the actual cause. These are not actual causes in the sense that they are not a part of the actual causal history of that belief. Swain contends that Raco justifiably holds his belief because the medical evidence *would have* caused the belief were the actual cause (prejudice) absent. Swain contends that even if the evidence does not actually cause the belief, it counterfactually causes the belief, and that is good enough for a proper basing relation.

Counterfactual beliefs can run very deep, however; for every counterfactual there could be another buried beneath it. Consider an example. Imagine that Jones is convinced that Keith Lehrer likes him. But Jones believes this for non-rational reasons: He has admired Lehrer for so long that the very idea that Lehrer might not actually like him would be emotionally devastating. Suppose further, however, that even if Jones did not feel such an emotional dependence on Lehrer's friendly feelings, the very fact that Lehrer once told Jones, "I like you," would suffice for Jones to hold the same belief. And even if Lehrer had never said that, Jones would have come to believe the same thing because of some episode where Lehrer behaved towards him in a friendly way, and so on. But this fact creates other problems for Swain's account.

In his article "Swain on the Basing Relation," Jonathan Kvanvig argues that there is no reason we should stop at counterfactual causes buried only by actual causes (Kvanvig 1985, 155). It is easy to imagine a case in which the actual cause and the counterfactual cause it buries are both illegitimate, yet a further buried counterfactual cause appropriately justifies the belief. For example, if the already racist Raco had gone to a fortune-teller prior to becoming a doctor, and the fortune-teller confirmed that the members of the other race were susceptible to the disease, then this would be the

counterfactual cause. If this were the case, both the actual cause (the prejudice) and appropriate counterfactual cause (the fortune teller) would be illegitimate, rendering Raco unknowledgeable, despite the fact that he holds a true belief, and is justified by evidence that he appreciates and believes after becoming a doctor.[1]

Lehrer himself concludes that the kind of account Swain attempts is inadequate because it confuses the reason a person has for believing something with the cause of the belief. Lehrer calls this error "the causal fallacy," and remarks:

> It is easy to see how the fallacy arises. When a person's justification for her belief is based on evidence, then she believes what she does *because* of the evidence. This suggests a causal account of what is involved when the justification of a belief is based on evidence. […] All such theories should be rejected, however.
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> […] The evidence that justifies a person's belief may be evidence she acquired because she already held the belief, rather than the other way round. This is to be expected, since it is common sense to distinguish between the reasons that justify a belief and the causes that produce it. The causes of belief are various, and, though the reasons we have for a belief sometimes cause the belief to arise, the belief may also arise from some other cause than the reasons that justify it. Having the reasons we do may justify the belief, however, even though they have no causal influence upon the belief at all. (Lehrer 2000, 196-197)

Indeed, both of the cases Lehrer gives—Raco and the lawyer—are examples in which the causes that produce the beliefs in question *do not* justify the belief, and yet both are cases in which the believers are justified in their beliefs. In both cases, in other words, the beliefs in question are *not* based on the evidence, because they were present prior to the cognizer's acquisition of the evidence, and both cognizers would have continued to hold their beliefs even in the absence of evidence, or in the face of contrary

[1] For another objection to Swain's account of the basing relation, see Tolliver 1982.

evidence. In fact, it is an explicit feature of the lawyer case that the lawyer's antecedent belief is part of what causes him to discover and recognize the justificatory significance of the evidence exonerating his client, which then converted the lawyer's existing belief into knowledge. In this case, then, the causal connection is exactly backwards from what Swain's account requires.

3. Harman's Explanatory Connection

Harman's explanatory account is another way to conceptualize the connection between justification and belief. Harman articulates a *becausal* or explanatory connection between belief and justification. In other words, "X causes Y" becomes "Y because X," or "X explains Y" (Harman 1973, 130). According to Harman, reasons for which one believes are reasons that explain why one believes. To illustrate his point, Harman (1973) utilizes the case of Albert the Existentialist. Albert has excellent reasons to believe that he will fail his philosophy class. He failed his midterm, does not understand the lectures, and the professor is known to fail a large percentage of the class. However, Albert does not appreciate the force of these reasons and prefers to attribute his impending failure to a different reason: At the beginning of the semester, Albert gave an impassioned speech defending the tenets of existentialism, and though the professor said nothing at the time, Albert was aware he was a proponent of the analytic tradition. Thus, Albert reasoned, because analytic philosophers scorn existentialists, the professor will fail him. Though Albert has excellent reasons for his belief (his poor performance), these are not the reasons for his belief.

Though Harman can explain Albert's lack of knowledge, his analysis would also preclude Raco and Lehrer's lawyer from knowledge. Though Raco and the lawyer have

excellent reasons for their beliefs, these reasons are not the reasons for why each holds his belief. Rather than amending his account in the face of such cases, Harman would insist that Raco and the lawyer do not possess knowledge. For Harman, Raco believes what he does *because* he is a racist, and the lawyer believes *because* he believes in tarot cards, just as Albert believes he will fail because he thinks the professor is out to get him. Only if the reasons for which these people believe, and subsequently the explanatory account of their beliefs, were to change could Raco, the lawyer, or Albert be credited with knowledge on Harman's account. [2]

Recall, however, the full extent to which Raco and the lawyer accept and respect the respective justifying evidence. Imagine Raco giving a talk at a medical conference. He will be able to explain his research articulately and accurately and also explain exactly and convincingly how it justifies his belief. Similarly, we can well imagine the lawyer making his closing remarks to the jury. He might well be so well-versed in the exonerating facts that he would be able to convince even the most skeptical of jurors. If epistemic agents are able compellingly to justify their beliefs to others, then surely we

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[2] Another who disputes Lehrer's assessment of his own cases is Audi (1983), who contends that Lehrer's lawyer should not be counted as justified, because the way in which the lawyer came to believe what he did was not a process that would reliably produce true belief. Had the cards told the lawyer something false, the lawyer would have believed the falsehood instead. Hence, it was only "good fortune" that the lawyer seemed to have good evidence for his belief: "Surely if one's belief that *p* is justified by good evidence, it cannot simply be good fortune that one did not believe something false instead" (Audi 1983, 406). We do not find this claim at all persuasive. No one disputes the fact that the lawyer's belief was the product of an incredibly unreliable belief-forming process. The issue at hand, however, is whether the belief's unreliable origin is enough to undermine its justification. Again, we find this implausible, for the process by which the lawyer re-examines his evidence is as reliable as the tarot cards are unreliable. A story is owed as to why the bad luck that affects the causal origin of a belief is enough to infect the justification of that belief. Lehrer replies to objections similar to the one made by Audi in Olsson (2003, 322-326).

ought to at least leave open the possibility that the beliefs they so justify actually qualify as *justified beliefs*.

4. Lehrer's Epistemic Agency Account

Lehrer does not include a specific analysis of the basing relation in either the first or the second edition of *Theory of Knowledge*. He insists only that "justification of a belief that is known to be true is based on certain evidence if and only if [the knower's] having that evidence explains how he knows that the belief is true" (Lehrer 1990, 171).[3] Notice that Lehrer has subtly changed the subject here—Lehrer wants to align *justification* with evidence, rather than basing *belief* on the evidence.[4] What is still needed is an account of what this modification specifically requires, and Lehrer does not explicitly supply such an account in *Theory of Knowledge*. However, several years earlier, in "Knowledge, Truth and Evidence," Lehrer contends:

> If a person has evidence adequate to completely justify his belief, he may still fail to be completely justified in believing what he does because his belief is not based on that evidence. What I mean by saying that a person's belief is not based on certain evidence is that he would not appeal to that evidence to justify his belief. (Lehrer 1964-1965, 169)

Notice that in the space of two sentences Lehrer shifts from talking about the *belief* needing to be based on the evidence to talking about whether or not the person would *justify* the belief in terms of the evidence. Lehrer seems to think that basing the *justification* on the evidence is an example of basing the *belief* on the evidence—but, of course, as his own now-famous examples of Raco and the lawyer show, these two things are not at all the same.

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[3] In (2000, 198), Lehrer changes the sentence somewhat: " Justification for acceptance of a belief that is known to be true is based on specific evidence if and only if [the knower's] having that evidence explains how he knows that the belief he accepts is true."
[4] We are not the first to have noticed this shift: See Audi (1983, 405).

Strictly speaking, Lehrer actually does not require that the belief itself be based on the evidence. Recall that Raco's belief is based on his prejudice, but that he would nevertheless cite the medical evidence in justifying his belief. This shows that what one would (sincerely) cite in justifying one's belief does not always reflect the basis of one's belief. So, for Lehrer, there is actually no requirement for a belief to be based on the evidence. Lehrer seems to suppose that his requirement is a version of the basing relation, but it is really another relation altogether—we may think of it as the "justification-giving relation." This relation is embodied in an epistemic agent's own metacognitive assessment of his or her justification, which is entirely independent of what qualifies as the actual basis of the belief itself. To satisfy Lehrer's justification-giving relation, the agent must count the evidence that justifies his or her holding the belief in question *as actually justifying* his or her holding that belief (which is why the agent would appeal to that evidence when called upon to justify his or her belief).

To see the importance of Lehrer's shift away from the basing relation to the justification-giving relation, let us return to the cases of Albert and Raco. We contend that the two cases are quite different. If a classmate asked Albert why he believes he will fail his philosophy class, he will undoubtedly respond that his professor is out to get him because he is an existentialist. Albert does not appreciate the evidential force of his failing test scores and inability to comprehend the lectures, so he will not report this evidence to his inquisitive classmate. In contrast, Raco appreciates the strength of the medical evidence. If asked at a medical conference what justifies his claim that the certain race is susceptible to the particular disease, he will recite the evidence he has

discovered. Lehrer's model takes into account an individual's appreciation of evidence that Harman's and Swain's theories ignore.

Harman contends that Lehrer's account cannot be correct, on the ground that an agent's testimony does not necessarily reveal the actual basis of his belief. Suppose Albert goes to his advisor (another analytic philosopher, let us suppose) to explain why he will fail his philosophy class. In order not to anger his advisor, Albert speaks of his failing grade on the midterm, his inability to understand the lectures, and the professor's reputation of frequently failing large percentages of students (Harman 1973, 26-27). Albert does not think these are particularly good reasons, and they are not the real reasons for which he believes as he does, and, hence, they cannot give him knowledge. Harman's analysis of this case seems to be correct, and in Lehrer 1971, he conceded the point (Lehrer 1971, 311), without abandoning his own account. To clarify his original intent, he then characterized the requirement this way:

> *r* is reasoning that gives *S* knowledge that *p* if and only if *r* is reasoning that provides a correct answer for *S* to the question, "How do you know that *p*?" (Lehrer 1971, 312).

It was plainly not Lehrer's original intention to claim that one is justified if one *falsely* reports one's evidence for a belief, for that is an example of simple dishonesty, and not a case in which the appropriate metacognitive self-assessment was successfully performed. In Harman's case, Albert is not telling the truth; he does not believe he will fail the class *because* of his poor performance. So, properly understood, Lehrer's theory is not simply about the evidence one would cite as justification, it is, rather about what the epistemic agent actually counts *as the justification* for his belief. This requires an honest self-assessment of one's evidence for a belief in order to possess knowledge. If

one undergoes this assessment and identifies a set of reasons as his evidence for a belief, yet reports different reasons to others, then he is not engaging in epistemic agency in an appropriate way.

Moreover, Lehrer argues that one must provide a plausible line of reasoning to show how one reaches the belief from the evidence one has (Lehrer 1964-1965, 169). If Harman is correct that Albert does not think his poor performance in class is a good reason for his belief he will fail, he will not be able to complete the line of reasoning that leads from his unsatisfactory work in his class to failing. There must be a premise addressing the legitimacy of the evidence as a good reason for the conclusion. If Albert cannot provide such a premise, he will not meet Lehrer's requirements for justification and he will not know. Suppose Albert's advisor had reason to believe a certain amount of extra credit in this class usually shielded against students failing. He may push further and ask Albert why he thinks his poor performance was a good reason to believe he was failing the class. According to Harman's own construction of the case, Albert would not be able to answer this question. Clearly, Albert's reasoning is not an example of justification as Lehrer understands it.

To clarify the specifics of Lehrer's new requirement, let us amend the original Raco case. Imagine that Raco, because he is an unapologetic racist, believes that the certain race is not only susceptible to the particular disease, but several other afflictions as well, such as halitosis, gingivitis, and gangrene. For years, Raco tells anyone who will listen that members of that race are susceptible to these diseases because they are weak, or some equally racist and incorrect reason. However, once Raco becomes a doctor, he no longer tells others that the certain race is susceptible to the particular disease because

they are weak, but because of the extensive medical evidence he has discovered. Yet when he discusses their susceptibility to halitosis, gingivitis, and gangrene, he continues to cite their racial weakness as the cause of their susceptibility. There is a clear difference in how Raco reports on these cases; one that illustrates the distinction between knowledge and belief. But again, the important difference lies not simply in how Raco reports his evidence—for he may never be challenged to report the evidence. The difference lies in Raco's metacognitive assessment of his evidence, on the basis of which he would report his justification in the ways he does, if challenged.

5. The Opacity Debate

Harman also objects that Lehrer's theory rests on the false assumption that reasons for which people believe things are conscious reasons (Harman 1970, 844). Harman argues that the reasons for which individuals believe things are not usually conscious to us. Harman notes the opacity of the *reasons for which one believes* (that is, the basing relations that explain why one believes what one does); but Lehrer's epistemic agency account relies on the sorts of reasons one reports to others because one regards these *as justification* for what one believes. Indeed, the reasons one reports to others or regards as justificatory are quite obviously conscious to the reporter—otherwise, the reporter would not be in a position to regard them *as justification*. Lehrer would consider it a strength of his theory that it requires one to be conscious of the reasons that are relevant to justification. Indeed, Lehrer often criticizes the readiness to declare an individual knowledgeable when he has no idea as to why he believes as he does. That we can be unaware of the actual bases of our beliefs, for Lehrer, is thus quite irrelevant.

A better illustration of the divergence between Lehrer and Harman in regards to opacity can be found in Lehrer's Truetemp case, originally offered by Lehrer as a counterexample to externalist accounts of justification or knowledge (Lehrer 1990, 163-164; Lehrer 2000, 186-188). In this case, unbeknownst to his victim, a scientist implants a temperature-belief producing device—a tempucomp—in the head of Mr. Truetemp. Truetemp suddenly finds himself forming spontaneous temperature beliefs, and because the tempucomp is functioning properly, these beliefs are extraordinarily reliable. In Lehrer's theory, until he confirms the reliability of his temperature beliefs, if someone were to ask Truetemp why he believed the temperature was 104 degrees, he would not be able to respond in any meaningful way. It is likely he would respond that he has no idea why he has these beliefs. If a person were to push further and ask if his belief was correct, Truetemp could not answer in the affirmative. The correctness of his beliefs is opaque to him. Only when Truetemp begins to check himself against thermometers and other temperature measuring devices would he come to be aware of the reliability and correctness of his beliefs about the temperature. Once Truetemp becomes aware of his reliability, he will be able to justify his temperature beliefs: it is because he has an unusual but incredibly reliable ability to correctly believe the temperature. And when someone asks him if his belief is correct, he will reply affirmatively. Notice Truetemp does not need to be conscious of the reason for which he believes (the tempucomp) in order to know. Thus, Harman's objection that Lehrer assumes the reasons for which individuals believe propositions are conscious is not true. In Lehrer's account, the (opaque) original causes of people's beliefs matter not at all, which is why Lehrer dismisses the idea that beliefs themselves must be based on the evidence, for knowledge.

Rather, he places importance on the reasons people regard as justificatory, that is, on the reasons that matter to them when they practice epistemic agency. These reasons, according to Lehrer, are the only reasons able to produce justification.

6. Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, we have defended Lehrer's epistemic agency understanding of the basing relation, though we have also noted that, strictly speaking, what Lehrer has called the basing relation is really a *different relation altogether* from the one normally required. As we have shown, Lehrer strictly speaking actually disagrees that one's beliefs must be based on the evidence, if they are to count as knowledge. Instead, the epistemic agent must count the evidence as what justifies his or her belief, for that belief to count as knowledge. Lehrer's account, we have claimed, best supports our intuitions in the face of many variations of the Raco case and it successfully explains the differences between the Raco and Albert.

It is curious that Lehrer chose not to provide the fuller details of his earlier analysis of the basing relation in either edition of his *Theory of Knowledge*. Indeed, Lehrer's earlier lawyer case is replaced in both editions by the Raco case, but we have tried to show in our review of these cases that the earlier (lawyer) case actually presents an advantage over the Raco case. While also providing all of the points Lehrer sought to make with the Raco case, the lawyer case actually provides a clear example in which the belief to be justified is both caused by factors that would not count as genuine justifications, but then actually is part of the cause of the lawyer's attainment of justification, on which the knowledge he comes to acquire is based. The lawyer case also resists the analyses of the accounts that have been given as rivals to Lehrer's account, for

Swain and Harman would both have to conclude that the lawyer did not know that his client was innocent of the eighth murder, despite the lawyer's appreciation for and apt uses of the evidence he acquired. If there is to be a third edition of *Theory of Knowledge*, then, we recommend that Keith Lehrer pay better attention to what Keith Lehrer has done on the basing relation.

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