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Externalism and Conditional Reasons

Laurence Bonjour (2003)[1] claims that the basic problem with epistemic externalism is that it sanctions what we might think of as *conditional reasons*, reasons of the general form: *if* such and such conditions are satisfied, *then* I have good reason to think that my beliefs are true. But, Bonjour argues,

> the vast majority of the things that we ordinarily think we have reason to believe to be true are obviously not in this way conditional in form. And it seems obvious at once that the existence of a conditional reason can provide a reason or justification for its non-conditional consequent only if there is some further reason or justification, which must seemingly be epistemically prior, for accepting the truth of its antecedent. (p. 10)

In this paper I examine Bonjour's objection to conditional reasons and argue that he fails to show that externalism's appeal to conditional reasons—and perhaps, by extension, externalism itself—is as epistemically alarming as he suggests.[2]

Bonjour describes epistemic internalism as the view that "the justifying reason for a basic belief, or indeed for any belief, must somehow be cognitively available to the believer himself, within his cognitive grasp or ken" (p. 24). Understood in this way, Bonjour argues, it follows that since one of the goals of epistemological reflection is to decide what it is now rational for me—from a first-person point of view—to believe, then it is bizarre to suppose that something that is cognitively invisible to me, i.e., something entirely outside the scope

[1] By Bonjour (2003) I mean the book listed in "Works Cited" as Bonjour and Sosa (2003). Since this is not a co-authored book in the usual sense but rather a debate book, it seems inappropriate to list them together here. Unless otherwise stated, page references in the text to Bonjour will refer to his contribution to this joint work.
[2] Throughout Bonjour (2003), and hence throughout this paper, "to have a reason" and "to be justified" are basically equivalent expressions. E.g., it is not as if justification is understood as necessarily knowledge-connected while to have a reason is not. Indeed, the issue of knowledge is explicitly set aside by both Bonjour and Sosa. Their focus is instead on what they refer to as "epistemic, rational, justification" (p. 2), where the emphasis is on the reasons one has for thinking that one's beliefs are true.

of my conscious awareness, could possibly count as a reason for me. And yet, he claims, this is precisely what the externalist holds.

More exactly, the problem is that the externalist condones appeals to conditional reasons. Suppose you see a towering spruce in your yard and form the belief *there's a spruce in my yard*. According to externalism, your visual experience counts as a good reason to think that the belief is true provided that you are in an environment where the way things look is good evidence for the way they are.[3] But from the point of view of someone interested in whether or not one's belief is true, Bonjour insists, what one wants to know is not *if (or "provided that") one is in such and such an environment, then one's evidence is truth-conducive*, but rather that one's evidence actually *is* truth-conducive; in particular, one wants to know that one is in an environment where the way things look is good evidence for the way they are.

We can make this point a little sharper. Suppose you are asked why you have this belief about the spruce, and you reply that it's because you *see* the spruce, or perhaps because it *looks to you* like there's a spruce. These, you say, are your reasons. It is then pointed out to you that your visual experience might be misleading, that you might be in a

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[3] Which, as the possibility of demon worlds show, is not a necessary truth. As this attempt to specify what an "externalist reason" amounts to might suggest, the very notion of an externalist reason is difficult to formulate coherently. Suppose you're in a demon world and you're fed an experience as-of a towering spruce in the yard. According to the externalist analysis of reasons suggested here, the subject of such an experience would not thereby have a good reason to believe that there is a spruce in the yard. But this result will strike many (though not, as we'll see, Bonjour himself!) as strange: surely even though the victim's belief is false, he should be counted as having *a good reason* to think it is true.

The basic difficulty is that externalists as a group are much more comfortable talking in terms of *justification* than in terms of *reasons* (see, e.g., Goldman [1986, p. 27] and Dretske [2000, p. xi]). Indeed, the very idea of an externalist reason might be thought by some externalists to involve what William Alston ([1980] 1989) has referred to as a "level confusion": thus, Alston might well say, whether a belief is formed by a truth-conducive faculty is one thing, but whether it is rationally defensible from a first-person point of view is something else. The concept of justification and the concept of reasons should therefore at the very least be carefully distinguished.

If forced to provide an analysis of reasons, however, my claim here is only that above analysis seems in keeping with their general commitments. It would also, of course, require them to bite several bullets. On this picture of reasons, for example, my conscious experience as-of a spruce simply is not a good reason for thinking that my belief about the spruce is true if I happen to be in a demon world. One could then try to find conceptual space for the contrary internalist intuition somewhere else, perhaps by appealing to the idea of the "appropriateness" of such a belief to experience (as DePaul 1993 argues), or perhaps in terms of what has come to be called "Foley rationality," i.e., a belief that would be sanctioned by one's own deepest epistemic standards (see, e.g. Foley 1993). Whether something would count as a genuine reason-for-thinking-one's-belief-true, however, would not be first-person accessible in the same way.

world where the way things look isn't, in fact, good evidence for the way they are. Moreover, it might be said, until you're in a position to know that you're not in such a world, your reasons are at best conditional. You thus still have more work to do; specifically, you still need to find a reason that genuinely supports the truth of your belief.

At this point your patience might start to run out and you might simply shrug your shoulders. Or, perhaps, if you're feeling more reflective, you might say: "Why think I need an extra reason like *that*? The reasons I have—e.g., the fact that I'm standing right here in good light *looking at the tree*—are good enough for me." Apart from exasperating the internalist, what's wrong from the point of view of rational justification, exactly, with such a response? How can the internalist show that you really *do* need an extra reason?

Bonjour tries to motivate this need in two ways. First, he claims that such an attitude is not only contrary to common sense, but that it leads to a scepticism about the external world that is both "immediate and catastrophic" (p. 188).

> Our fundamental common sense conviction, I suggest, is not that we have 'knowledge' in some unspecified sense, nor that our empirical beliefs are 'epistemically justified' in a sense that is loosely enough specified to admit externalism is a possible interpretation. It is rather the conviction that in general we actually do have *good reasons* within our cognitive grasp for thinking that our various beliefs about the world are true: good reasons to think that there is a physical world, that it contains various kinds of familiar objects, that the world did exist in the past, that nature follows regular laws, etc. Indeed, that anyone who denies such things is flying in the face of reason and good sense. If we did not have such a conviction, there would be nothing particularly implausible about scepticism and no particular reason to think that our beliefs are justified in *any* sense, including the externalist one. (pp. 39-40)[4]

Thus, Bonjour claims, when we "sit down in a cool hour" of the day and consider whether or not our beliefs are true (p. 41), we characteristically find that we have good reasons to think that they *are* true, reasons that don't just boil down to arbitrary convictions or blind faith.

[4] See also pp. 6, 175, and 199-200 for further appeals to common sense.

Second, Bonjour uses his well-known clairvoyance cases to argue that appeals to conditional reasons go hand in hand with epistemic irresponsibility.[5] Thus consider Bertha, a reliable clairvoyant who has no evidence either against her particular clairvoyant beliefs or against the reliability of the faculty in general. Are Bertha's clairvoyant beliefs justified? According to Bonjour, certainly not.

> We may assume that Bertha does not believe either that she is clairvoyant or, more generally, that her beliefs arrived at in this way are likely to be true.... But then it appears that Bertha is still being epistemically irrational and irresponsible in accepting beliefs whose provenance can only be a total mystery to her, whose status is as far as she can tell no different from that of a stray hunch or arbitrary conviction. Here again, externalism seems to sunder the concept of epistemic justification entirely from the concept of epistemic rationality or responsibility, leaving the former concept with no clear intuitive content. (p. 32)

Bertha's irresponsibility, Bonjour claims, stems from her lack of positive reasons to support her clairvoyance. As things stand, it is as if she had just dipped her hand into a huge bowl of contingent propositions, most of which were false, and blindly selected one based on nothing more than the naïve hope that it was true (p. 32). And if this kind of believing isn't unjustified, then what is? Bonjour thus insists that genuine reasons must be nonconditional; or, more precisely, that one must have positive reason to believe that the antecedent of the conditional is satisfied.

Fortunately, Bonjour thinks that reasons of this kind can be found to support two different sorts of beliefs: (a) *a priori* beliefs, and (b) beliefs about conscious experience. There is not enough time here to go into the details of his view, but I will briefly try to show how he thinks beliefs about conscious experience in particular can be used to generate positive, nonconditional reasons to support one's beliefs about the external world.[6]

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[5] Michael Williams (2000), for one, agrees that clairvoyance cases show that externalism severs the link between justification and responsibility. Thus Williams, considering the question of whether the reliable clairvoyant's beliefs amount to knowledge, claims: "The reason for answering 'No' is that it is irresponsible for a person to rely on a method of belief-formation that the person himself has every reason to believe to be completely unreliable, even if he is wrong about its unreliability" (p. 34).

[6] Bonjour develops his account of *a priori* belief in Bonjour (1998).

Suppose you are having a visual experience as-of something blue. Since this belief is contingent, Bonjour insists that you need a reason to believe that the belief is true, i.e., that it accurately describes the actual world (p. 5). But, Bonjour argues, you surely do have such a reason: simply in virtue of having your conscious experience, you possess a built-in awareness of the *content* of that experience (p. 70), and hence you can exploit that awareness to evaluate whether the belief in question truly describes the experience. According to Bonjour, your built-in awareness of the content of conscious experience therefore puts you in "a good, indeed an ideal, position to judge directly whether the conceptual description is accurate as far as it goes, and if so, to be thereby justified in accepting the belief" (p. 73). The basic idea is thus that this justification is so good, and so satisfying from the first-person perspective, because all the elements of justification are right there for inspection within the consciousness of the believer. Such beliefs about one's conscious experience thus deserve the title "basic" or "foundational" on Bonjour's view.

Bonjour next considers how a believer might use these beliefs about conscious experience to acquire justified beliefs about the external world. According to Bonjour, the first thing to notice is that the content of conscious experience, and in particular the way in which experience presents a spontaneous yet coherent and unbroken stream of colors, shapes, and (apparent) depths, clearly calls out for explanation. To his mind, "this complicated pattern of experience...cannot be plausibly viewed as either just a matter of chance or as somehow an ultimate and not further explicable brute fact" (p. 92).

But what sort of explanation best fits the bill? Bonjour argues that neither Descartes's evil demon nor Berkeley's God, to name but two well-known contenders, can compete with the hypothesis that external objects cause our experience, primarily because "a multi-dimensional world of some sort seems needed to account for the various sorts of experiential paths that return to the same experiential starting point" (93)—and this

impression of multi-dimensionality, apparently, is something that neither an evil demon nor God can readily create. There is thus good reason, says Bonjour, to think that one's experience is caused by the objects that they appear to be caused by—indeed, a positive, nonconditional reason of the sort apparently sought by every believer.

II.

As intriguing as the positive details of Bonjour's project are, in the remainder of this paper I will focus on Bonjour's attempt to motivate the claim that there is something epistemically defective about relying on conditional reasons.

Recall that Bonjour supports this claim by arguing that appeals to conditional reasons (a) violate common sense, and (b) involve a kind of irresponsibility that is at odds with rationality. In what follows I will largely focus on his case for (b). But first what should we make of (a)—the idea that internalism's insistence on nonconditional reasons (and, by extension, its rejection of conditional reasons) enjoys the backing of common sense?

This is hard to swallow for several reasons. First, if common sense tells us anything, it surely tells us that a principle such as *the way things look is good (though defeasible) evidence for the way they are* is as fundamental as it gets; the "man on the street" would think it lunacy to deny it. But there is a further, Bonjourian reason for denying that conditional reasons violate common sense; namely, the very fact that Bonjour's attempt to ground reasons in our introspective awareness of conscious experience requires such extensive philosophical training should warn us that, if this is what it takes to arrive at nonconditional reasons, then few if any nonphilosophers (or for that matter philosophers!) would ever find themselves in such a fortunate position. As Bonjour acknowledges,

> I am inclined to think...that the externalist is at least approximately right about this.... [T]he only version of foundationalism that seems to me ultimately defensible seems to require more subtlety and complexity of both thought and inference than unsophisticated subjects can, in general, plausibly be said to engage in. (p. 34)

Perhaps Bonjour could find a way to reconcile his "common sense" rejection of conditional reasons with his admission that few if any believers actually base their beliefs on nonconditional reasons. Perhaps, for instance, he might claim that while common sense does indeed tell us (when we reflect in the cool hour of the day) that we have good, nonconditional reasons for thinking that our beliefs are true, as a regrettable matter of fact the reasons that common sense relies on fail the nonconditionality test time and time again. Common sense would therefore emerge as correct in principle, but mistaken in execution.

But there is little reason to think that common sense is of two minds on this question. We can agree with Bonjour that common sense takes our perceptual beliefs based on conscious experience (e.g.) to be well-grounded in some crucial sense; put another way, in the eyes of common sense our perceptual beliefs are not mere "stray hunches" or "arbitrary convictions" (p. 32). Nevertheless it is one thing to deny that our beliefs about the world are based on stray hunches or arbitrary convictions, quite another to insist that they rest on Bonjour-style super foundations. Instead what common sense seems to tell us is that the proper thing to do is to *trust* one's conscious experience of the world—so that the ways things look should indeed be taken as good (though defeasible) evidence for the way they are. Is such trust blind? It certainly doesn't seem like it, and this (again) even once we come to appreciate the fact that this evidence is only contingently reliable, and hence that what we take to be good evidence for the way the world is might in fact turn out to be pervasively misleading.

What then about the charge that the appeal to conditional reasons encourages epistemic irresponsibility? Bonjour is once more right about this much: we certainly do think that responsible epistemic behavior is deeply tied up with rationality, and hence that clairvoyants who go around forming beliefs willy-nilly undercut the rationality of their beliefs, even if they happen to be reliable. But while that seems fair to say, the problem is

that Bonjour motivates his further, crucial claim about clairvoyants—namely, *that their irresponsibility stems specifically from their use of conditional reasons*—by appealing to standards of what counts as responsible epistemic conduct that simply aren't, or at least shouldn't be, available to internalists such as Bonjour. In other words, to the extent that Bonjour gets us to shake our heads in agreement with his analysis of clairvoyant cases, this is only by tacitly appealing to common sense views about what counts as a good reason, and about what counts as responsible epistemic conduct, that are far more positive about the use of conditional reasons than he is willing to acknowledge.

To see this, suppose it suddenly clairvoyantly seems to Bertha that the Mayor of Hoboken, NJ is dead. Naturally, at first she doesn't know what to make of this. The truth of the belief seems very compelling (we can suppose) by virtue of the way her clairvoyant faculty delivers the information; nevertheless, she reserves her judgment. But the deliverances keep coming: it soon seems to her not only that the mayor is dead, but that he was killed in such and such a way, in such and such a place, and so on.

At some point Bertha becomes sufficiently curious that she buys a plane ticket to Hoboken to investigate. And she's in luck! She sees the corpse of the mayor at the funeral, hears the testimony of others that the death took place in the very way that it appeared to her clairvoyantly, and in general finds piles of corroborating evidence.

Now suppose at this point Bertha comes to trust her clairvoyant beliefs. Would they be justified? Unfortunately, on a straightforward application of Bonjour's view, even after having completed her trip Bertha would be essentially no better off than if she had recklessly invested all her faith in the original deliverances of the faculty in the first place—and perhaps even if she had just taken a blind stab in the dark, picking out a proposition at random and deciding to assent to it. Why? Because all Bertha's fact-finding mission to New Jersey managed to accomplish, on Bonjour's view, was to support or shore up one kind of

conditionally reliable evidence—clairvoyant evidence—with other kinds of conditionally reliable evidence such as perception and testimony. From the perspective of someone seeking the truth, however, such additional evidence should come to nothing more than a further piling on of the stray hunches and arbitrary convictions we mentioned earlier whose only virtue, we can suppose, is that they happen to agree with one another.

But this, surely, is a startling result. While we might therefore be tempted to agree that the clairvoyant who fails to check up on the deliverances of her faculty is unjustified because irresponsible, no doubt Bertha, as just described, deserves high marks for her epistemic behavior. The fact that on Bonjour's view all Bertha's efforts turn out to be for naught—a kind of chasing after the wind that can provide no genuine justification or support for her beliefs—is striking to say the least.

To make this point still more concrete, compare Bertha with a second clairvoyant, call her Zora. Zora has read Bonjour carefully and thus knows a thing or two about good reasons. When Zora receives her first clairvoyant deliverances—for simplicity, imagine they're also about the Mayor of Hoboken—she is therefore justly suspicious. In particular, she thinks, "Sure, *if* these deliverances are reliable, then I would have a good reason to believe that the mayor is dead. But it would be irrational—indeed, irresponsible!—to base my beliefs on such a conditional reason. I therefore need to find some positive reason to think that the deliverances actually *are* reliable."

Bertha, we saw, had a similar reaction, and hence at this point bought a ticket to Hoboken to investigate things for herself. As a good Bonjourian, however, Zora takes a rather different approach—indeed, to her mind the only truly rational, responsible approach. Rather than travel to New Jersey, she retreats into a dark room, locks the door, and proceeds to introspect.

In the quiet of the room, imagine that Zora receives all of the previous deliverances about the Mayor of Hoboken. In keeping with the strategy laid out by Bonjour, she then proceeds to form beliefs *about* these deliverances: e.g., *I am now being clairvoyantly appeared to as if the Mayor is dead, as if he was killed with a corkscrew*, and so on. After accumulating several such beliefs about her experience, she next examines them as a group and carefully considers how they might best be explained. She is struck by the following fact: even though the experiences arise spontaneously, they all form part of a seamless whole; they all seem to agree with one another, even down to the tiniest detail. It is therefore unlikely that these deliverances are the product of mere chance or bad wiring, she thinks; chance couldn't produce such consistency. It is also unlikely that the they are the product of, say, an evil deceiver manipulating her conscious experience; for such a deceiver couldn't easily produce experiences that blend so seamlessly into one another. She thus concludes that the best explanation for the particular quality and character of her deliverances is that they actually *are* reflections of the world. In other words, that they actually are *truth-conducive reasons* of the sort Bonjour requires. Her epistemic journey over, Zora then emerges from her room, confident that her beliefs about the Mayor of Hoboken are backed by reasons of the highest quality.

Let's now compare our two clairvoyants, Bertha and Zora. According to Bonjour, undoubtedly, it is Zora who takes the prize. It hardly needs saying, though, that common sense tells us that Bertha is the one who behaved most admirably in virtually all the relevant epistemic respects: not only did she acquire a rich and diverse set of positive reasons for thinking that her beliefs were true, but she also acted as responsibly and dutifully as anyone could want. Indeed, I suspect that if we continue to have lingering reservations about Bertha's clairvoyant beliefs, it is not, as Bonjour would have us believe, because of her appeal to conditional reasons, but rather because of our natural tendency to view

clairvoyance as an exotic (even spooky) faculty, one for which we harbor hard-to-shake background defeaters. But this, clearly, is a separate point against clairvoyance, one unrelated to its reliance on conditional reasons.

We need to take some care in assessing the significance of this result. I do not claim to have shown, or even to have tried to show, that Bonjour's opposition to conditional reasons is, say, ultimately incoherent. As I noted at the outset, the problem is rather that Bonjour fails adequately to *motivate* this opposition. Although he claims that clairvoyance cases show that the use of conditional reasons divorces rationality from epistemic responsibility, if my analysis of the above clairvoyance cases is correct, this doesn't follow. As Bertha demonstrates, the appeal to conditional reasons seems perfectly consistent with the demands of rational, responsible believing. Of course, it is not consistent with the demands of *Bonjourian* rational, responsible believing, but since the legitimacy of those demands is the very thing at issue, he cannot appeal to them to establish his point.

Again, this doesn't show that the opposition to conditional reasons considered in itself is mistaken. But if the previous analysis is correct, it does show that Bonjour now has the opposition of common sense to contend with, by his own reckoning an unwelcome result.

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