

The Experiential Defeasibility and Overdetermination of A Priori

Justification

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The question whether a belief justified a priori is indefeasible in general and experientially indefeasible in particular has received different answers. In a recent and interesting paper “Experientially Defeasible A Priori Justification”,¹ Joshua Thurow argues that many a priori justified beliefs are defeasible by experience. The argument takes the form of an objection against Albert Casullo’s recent book *A Priori Justification* where Casullo, according to Thurow, denies that if a justified belief is non-experientially defeasible, then that belief is also experientially defeasible.

This paper examines Thurow’s two arguments in the first two sections I-II. In the last section, III, an alternative line of argument for Thurow’s thesis is suggested that employs other parts of the framework that Casullo provides – especially the thesis of the overdetermination of justification. It will be argued that the prospects for this suggestion are brighter than for both of Thurow’s arguments.

I The First Argument

Thurow’s argument has the following form:

Premise 1: Many a priori (or non-experientially) justified beliefs are defeasible by non-experiential evidence.

Premise 2: If a belief is defeasible by non-experiential evidence, then it is defeasible by experiential evidence.

Conclusion: Therefore many a priori justified beliefs are defeasible by experiential evidence.

Thurow also argues for the conclusion via the contrapositive of Premise 2, *viz*

Premise 2*: If a belief is indefeasible by experiential evidence, then it is indefeasible by non-experiential evidence.²

Premise 2 and 2* are obviously the key steps in the argument.

Let us start our examination with Premise 2. Thurow supports this premise by bringing in “multiple corroborating sources of testimony”. Suppose a subject S is defeasibly justified

(since we assume Premise 1 is true) a priori in believing P, but that it turns out that several other persons, whom S takes to be more competent in these matters than herself, all claim to have found a non-experiential defeater (Thurrow mentions intuition) for P. Given that (i) these persons convince S, (ii) testimony constitutes experiential evidence, and (iii) this example is generalizable, Premise 2 is true.³

Two objections can be raised against this argument. First, (ii) is a problematic step in Thurrow's argument. The epistemology of testimony is a controversial and difficult topic, but (ii) can be denied by appeal to Tyler Burge's model of content preservation. First, according to Burge, we have an a priori entitlement to the rationality of the testifier and the truth of the testimony "simply by virtue of the prima facie intelligibility of the message conveyed". The reliability of the testifier need not be assessed unless there are stronger reasons to suspect otherwise. The burden of proof is upon someone who suspects the testifier rather than upon someone who trusts her. Trust, rather than suspicion, is the default position.⁴ Second, and more importantly, testimony itself, like memory, does not play any justificatory role, but a purely preservative one. It preserves the justification of the original source,⁵ which, according to Thurrow, in this case is a *nonexperiential* defeater. Unless it is shown that such a model is false, Thurrow's argument does not go through. As long as the transmitted defeater is a priori, Thurrow has not provided an experiential defeater, but, on the contrary, a nonexperiential one.

Second, it is far from clear that Thurrow's argument escapes Casullo's original objections against an earlier version of the argument with one single source of testimony. Casullo maintains that in order to assess the argument the following parameters must be specified:

- A. The degree to which my non-experiential evidence justifies belief in P.
- B. The degree to which a belief that Q must be justified in order to defeat a justified belief that P.
- C. The degree to which testimony justifies my belief that Q.⁶

Casullo then suggests a specification of A-C, which makes the single case-version of Thurow's argument false:

A*. The belief that P is justified to the degree of certainty (the highest degree of justification).

B*. A justified belief that Q defeats a justified belief that P iff the degree of justification for Q equals or exceeds the justification for P.

C*. The degree of justification for a proposition is diminished when it is transferred by a fallible source.

It is in order to compensate for the diminishment in justification that Thurow increases the number of testifiers. Nevertheless, there are at least two problems with this line of argument. First, it is hard to see how any number of testifiers could succeed in reaching the highest degree of justification, certainty, a degree that apriorists typically hold that a priori justified beliefs enjoy. Second, it is not clear anyway that merely adding testifiers will increase the degree of justification for Q sufficiently compared to one single source.⁷ One may claim that the additions converge rather than simply add up. Perhaps they land above the single source, but still far below the high degree that nonexperiential sources of justification reach, in which case P would not be experientially defeated after all. Thus, even if we accept his view on testimony, Thurow has not shown that Q can defeat P no matter how many testifiers are added.

Thurow's argument suffers from these objections. However, Thurow also argues for his conclusions via Premise 2* the contrapositive of Premise 2. Let us therefore examine whether Thurow's alternative route fares better than his main argument.

II The Second Argument

Thurow defends Premise 2* by giving three examples of beliefs that he claims are non-experientially justified, but indefeasible by any source – experiential or non-experiential:

- I. All bachelors are men.

II. If X killed Y, then Y died.

III. If X knows that p, then p is true.⁸

A justified belief is thus either both experientially and non-experientially defeasible or not at all. In all three cases, Thurow holds that they are justified a priori by intuition.

Thurow handles apparent counterexamples by disambiguation. Apparent counterexamples reveal that the terms used to express the concepts involved in I-III may be ambiguous. By distinguishing between the different contents of the concepts, we realize that I-III remain true concerning at least one of the disambiguated terms. However, such a strategy comes with a price. These examples can be saved from counterexamples through disambiguation either by stipulation or by the subject having an idiosyncratic idiolect, but in both cases the significance of the intuition is called into doubt. In the first case, intuition does not play any justificatory role. In addition, stipulation faces the threat of becoming “a passing trait” as W. V. Quine calls it; that is, even though a term may be introduced through stipulation, it becomes descriptive if it catches on within the linguistic community.⁹ In the second case, the intuition may accurately describe the idiolect of the subject, but seems unable to persuade other users with divergent usage.

Having rebutted Thurow’s strategy against counterexamples to Premise 2*, let us begin the search for some by first noting that I is an example of what Hilary Putnam calls a one-criterion concept and may thus as analytic be exempt from any experiential defeaters (as well as epistemological interest)¹⁰ whereas both II and III are cluster concepts in his terminology.¹¹ Unlike one-criterion concepts whose meaning can be captured by one sole criterion – bachelors are unmarried men, the meaning of cluster concepts are constituted by several principles which form the framework of a theory. Putnam is mainly interested in physical theory and call concepts playing that role in such theories law cluster concepts.¹² As parts of a

physical theory, these concepts are, according to Putnam, subject to revision in the face of recalcitrant experience.

However, since we need non-experientially defeasible but experientially indefeasible justified beliefs, these remarks are of no immediate help for our dialectical purposes. Nevertheless, since II and III are cluster concepts, they are potentially non-experientially defeasible in the following way. On the assumption that II and III are justified by intuition, it is difficult to deny that there are several conceptual connections than just the ones affirmed in II and III. If there is one conceptual link justified by intuition for the involved concepts, then there are many. III would be a case in point. Knowledge is not only conceptually connected to truth, but also to justification and truth is in turn conceptually connected to coherence or correspondence where as justification is thus linked to evidence.¹³ A cluster is thus formed consisting solely of a priori justified beliefs. Now such a cluster may face highly problematical consequences. As an example, current epistemologies endorse III, but face the skeptical threat. Perhaps we could escape that threat by giving up III? This author does not think so, but cannot rule it out. Thurow gives us no reason why such an overriding¹⁴ defeater would not be non-experiential.

Moreover, as a general objection to the proposed indefeasible status of I-III, we cannot exclude the possibility of the faculty of intuition undermining itself à la Kant's antinomies by generating conflicting intuitions. Such a scenario would yield non-experiential undermining defeaters. In these cases, I-III would, after all, remain experientially indefeasible, but be non-experientially defeasible.

Neither of Thurow's arguments thus succeeds. However, rather surprisingly, he does not take the opportunity of employing other parts of Casullo's framework that may yield his desired conclusion. Let us do so in his place.

III Overdetermination: An Alternative Route

Can we find better support for Premise 2? In order to do so, let us first introduce a fruitful distinction between different kinds of defeaters that Casullo makes frequent use of in his book, but which is absent from Thurow's paper. An *overriding* defeater to a justified belief that P provides justification for non-P, while an *undermining* defeater to the justified belief that P defeats the *justification* provided for P.¹⁵

Second, Thurow also neglects to take the thesis of overdetermination into account. According to Casullo, this thesis is a "widely endorsed criterion of adequacy" for defining a priori justification and it plays a crucial role in his objections to arguments against the existence of a priori justification.¹⁶ The thesis says that a belief that is justified a priori can also be justified a posteriori. The justificatory status of such a belief is overdetermined by receiving justification from several sources of justification both experiential and non-experiential. Now, if a belief can be justified both a priori and a posteriori, then it can also be defeated on non-experiential as well as experiential grounds (see below). Even though Casullo himself does not pursue this strategy, we could next try to generalize overdetermination to all a priori justified beliefs and thus reach a conclusion similar to Thurow's in this way instead. Let us investigate the prospects of this strategy with the help of the above-mentioned distinction with special focus on the prospects of generalization.

Even though a case could be made for general and experiential undermining defeaters to a priori justified beliefs,¹⁷ the case of overriding defeaters seems even more promising. If a priori justified beliefs admit empirical confirmation through application, then they are also vulnerable to experiential defeaters in the form of empirical counterexamples. The arithmetic proposition that $7+5=12$ receives inductive support by the fact that adding five apples to seven apples gives you twelve apples, but would be seriously infirmed by any counterexample.¹⁸

What about the more arcane portions of mathematics and logic that do not seem to admit any empirical application at all? Adopting what Casullo calls holistic radical empiricism, associated with Quine, would here help to provide at least indirect confirmation and infirmation. Persistence of recalcitrant experience may force scientists to revise even such experientially remote parts of their overall theory.¹⁹ Holistic radical empiricists have usually taken this possibility as showing that a priori justification does not exist, but this contention could be rejected with the help of the thesis of overdetermination. Holistic radical empiricism combined with overdetermination yields a conclusion in the vicinity of where Thurow's argument was supposed to take us. Moreover, this argument is as general as Thurow's argument purports to be.²⁰

The poor track record that face non-experiential sources of justification that repeatedly become overthrown by experiential overriding defeaters might seem a threatening undermining defeater to these sources. Fitting cases in the history of science and philosophy provide support.²¹ However, Casullo defends a minimal conception of a priori justification according to which it simply is nonexperiential justification.²² That conception neither entails necessity, certainty nor indefeasibility. Occasional empirical counterexamples do thus not destroy nonexperiential sources as sources of justification – just as occasional lapses of memory overridingly defeated by perception is fully consistent with preserving memory as a reliable source of justification.

Combining holistic radical empiricism and overdetermination come with certain costs,²³ but without this assumption the generality of experiential defeasibility is lost. If we are willing to pay them, we have seen that a case can be made for the thesis that *all* a priori justified beliefs are experientially defeasible within Casullo's framework. That was, admittedly, not Thurow's intended conclusion. However, these considerations nevertheless show that it is the thesis of overdetermination rather than Thurow's arguments that should be

the center of our concern. Overdetermination is the key – irrespective of which of the four combinations of denying or affirming the existence of a priori justification, with or without experiential defeasibility, one wishes to argue for.²⁴

¹ Thurow 2006.

² Ibid: 596.

³ Ibid: 598. Thurow rehearses an argument from Aron Edidin 1984 with a single case of testimony, which is the argument Casullo objects to in Casullo 2003: 69-72. Thurow attempts to strengthen Edidin's argument in the face of Casullo's objections by increasing the number of testifiers (see below).

⁴ Burge 1993: 470-472, where he also refers to Davidson's view of interpretation (among others). Entitlement is the weaker sibling of justification (ibid: 458). Burge later defends his model in Burge 1997.

⁵ Burge 1993: 486-487. Burge discusses memory on pp. 462-466.

⁶ Thurow 2006: 598 and Casullo 2003: 70.

⁷ This point holds irrespective of whether the degree of certainty is required or some lower threshold that the single source falls short of.

⁸ Thurow 2006: 600.

⁹ “[C]onventionality is a passing trait, significant at the moving front of science but useless in classifying the sentences behind the lines. It is a trait of events and not of sentences.” Quine 1963: 119. See also Putnam 1962: 38, 45 & 55-56.

¹⁰ The criteria of such concepts are stated on p. 65 of ibid. See also the ensuing discussion on pp. 65-69.

¹¹ Ibid: 52. By depicting such concepts as *relatively* a priori, Putnam displays a different strategy in handling the experiential defeasibility of beliefs justified a priori.

¹² Ibid: 52-54. Law cluster concepts are contrasted with one-criterion concepts on pp. 57-59.

¹³ The fact that epistemologists disagree about these suggested conceptual connections support the ensuing point and gives rise to further counterexamples.

Mentioning the concept of knowledge, Putnam claims that “*knowing* is something that we do not have much of a theory about” (ibid: 40). It is undeniably true that we have not reached a consensus concerning the concept of knowledge; nevertheless the point remains that unlike the concept of a bachelor it is a highly theoretical concept.

¹⁴ The distinction between overriding and undermining defeaters is explained in section III.

¹⁵ In light of this distinction, Premise 2 might need revision. As Premise 2 is formulated, the defeater seems to operate on the belief that P, which may fit overriding defeaters, but not undermining defeaters. At least, a defeater should instead operate on P where P would be the *justified belief* formed as an ordered pair, or perhaps even only on the justification in isolation. Casullo has suggested the possibility of defeaters operating solely on the justification in private correspondence. For the remaining unclarity pertaining to the distinction, see Janvid 2006: 143-144.

¹⁶ Casullo 2003: 43 & Chapter 5. For reservations concerning the thesis of overdetermination, see Janvid 2006: 139-140.

¹⁷ One example would be deficiencies in either the subject or her environment at the time of justification. The subject may be too tired or drunk or the environment too dark or noisy. Such circumstances may affect the ability to perform a posteriori justification as well as a priori justification. In that case we would have experiential undermining defeaters of a priori justified beliefs. However, if one holds intersubjectivity as a condition of adequacy (as this author is inclined to), then one could escape this kind of undermining experiential defeaters by arguing that this kind of undermining defeaters do not have any significant role to play. The criterion determining whether a subject that proved a logical theorem was too drunk would simply be whether she provided a valid proof. Compare perception with hypothetical-deductive reasoning as an experiential analogue.

¹⁸ Casullo considers empirical counterexamples to mathematics in Casullo 2003: 93-96 and his considerations are in turn discussed in Janvid 2006: 141-142.

¹⁹ Casullo 2003): 123-125 and Quine 1951: 42-43. See also Janvid 2006: 142-144. Quine's argument is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 of Janvid 2001.

Within a holistic system, the opposite phenomenon of underdetermination becomes a concern as Quine has repeatedly stressed. For a recent overview, see Bergström 2004. There within it also becomes difficult to regard the distinction between direct and indirect confirmation/infirmation as more than a difference of degree.

²⁰ The possibility that an overriding defeater provides justification for a belief that merely forms a contrary pair with the justified belief in question, rather than a contradictory pair, admittedly complicates matters somewhat.

²¹ Quine 1951: 43. See also Janvid 2001: 52-56 and Janvid 2006: note 3.

²² Casullo 2003: 3 and throughout the whole book.

²³ One problem is that from a holistic perspective, specifying sources of justification become difficult or even futile. Justification is rather regarded coherently as a joint endeavor with stress upon the overall merits of the system.

²⁴ Thanks to Albert Casullo, Peter Pagin, Levi Spectre and two anonymous referees for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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