

Silins's Liberalism

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Received: 20 October 2010 / Accepted: 11 December 2010
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Abstract Nico Silins has proposed and defended a form of Liberalism about perception that, he thinks, is a good compromise between the Dogmatism of Jim Pryor and others, and the Conservatism of Roger White, Crispin Wright, and others. In particular, Silins argues that his theory can explain why having justification to believe the negation of skeptical hypotheses is a necessary condition for having justification to believe ordinary propositions, even though (contra the Conservative) the latter is not had in virtue of the former. I argue that Silins's explanation is unsuccessful, and hence that we should prefer either White/Wright-style Conservatism (which can explain this necessary condition) or Pryor-style Dogmatism (which denies that this is a necessary condition).

Keywords Liberalism about perception · Conservatism about perception · Dogmatism

1 Liberalism and Conservatism

According to Liberalism About Perception of the sort argued for by Jim Pryor,¹ my perceptual experience as of a tree in front of me can give me prima facie justification to believe that there's a tree in front of me which does not "rest on" or "presuppose" my justification to believe any other propositions (for example, that my senses are reliable, or that I'm not a brain in a vat). If that prima facie justification is undefeated, then Pryor thinks that my perceptual experience as of a tree can furnish me with all-things-considered justification to believe that there's a tree in front of me. When that

¹ In Pryor (2000).

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happens, my justification to believe that there's a tree in front of me is had immediately, in virtue *only* of my perceptual experience, and not in virtue of any justification that I might have to believe any other propositions. Pryor also thinks that it's possible for my perceptual experience as of a tree to furnish me with all-things-considered justification to believe that there's a tree even if I *don't* have any justification to believe that (for example) my senses are reliable; all that is required for Pryor is that I *lack* justification to believe that my senses are *unreliable*.

According to Conservatism About Perception of the sort argued for by Roger White² and Crispin Wright,³ when I have a perceptual experience as of a tree in front of me and come to have justification to believe that there's a tree in front of me, that justification is mediated by—or had in virtue of—justification that I have to believe other propositions, such as the proposition that my senses are reliable. So, for the Conservative, it *isn't* possible for me to have perceptual justification to believe that there is a tree in front of me unless I also have justification to believe these other propositions; for the Conservative, merely lacking justification to believe the negations of these other propositions isn't enough.

2 Silins's Liberalism

Nico Silins is a Liberal About Perception,⁴ and so agrees with Pryor that my perceptual justification to believe that there's a tree isn't had in virtue of any justification that I have to believe any other propositions. But Silins is also persuaded that White and Wright are right that it is impossible for me to have perceptual justification to believe that there's a tree unless I also have justification to believe other propositions, such as the proposition that my senses are working properly. So Silins agrees with White and Wright that my having justification to believe that my senses are working properly is a necessary condition for my having perceptual justification to believe that there's a tree. What makes Silins a Liberal, rather than a Conservative, is that Silins denies that my perceptual justification to believe that there's a tree is mediated by—i.e., had in virtue of—my justification to believe that my senses are reliable.

Such a position is clearly coherent; just because A is a necessary condition for B, it clearly doesn't follow that B is true in virtue of A. To take a trivial example, that all dogs are dogs is a necessary condition for me to have perceptual justification to believe that there's a tree, since it's metaphysically impossible for the latter to be true without the former also being true (since it's metaphysically impossible for the former to be false). Similarly, it's perfectly coherent for Silins to claim that my having justification to believe that my senses are reliable is a necessary condition for my having perceptual justification to believe that there's a tree, but that this justification to believe that my senses are reliable is no part of what *brings it about* that I have justification to believe that there's a tree.

² In White (2006).

³ In Wright (2002, 2004, 2008).

⁴ This view is developed in Silins (2008).

3 The Conservative explanation of C

To be a bit more precise, according to both the Conservative and Silins, the following claim **C** is true:

- C** Necessarily, if S has E , and E gives S justification to believe H , and S knows that H entails $\neg K$, then S has independent justification to believe $\neg K$.

In general, if a philosopher is committed to the claim that A is a necessary condition for B , we'd like for him to be able to *explain* why A is necessary for B . Above, I gave the example that the truth of "All dogs are dogs" is a necessary condition for my having perceptual justification to believe that there's a tree. And it's perfectly straightforward for either the Conservative or the Liberal to explain why that's so; since it's metaphysically necessary that all dogs are dogs, the fact that all dogs are dogs is a necessary condition for *anything*, and so of course it's a necessary condition for my having perceptual justification to believe that there's a tree.

What about **C**? A Liberal like Pryor thinks that **C** is false, so he obviously owes us no explanation of its truth. A Conservative like White thinks that **C** is true, and it's straightforward for him to explain why **C** is true. According to the Conservative, whenever S has justification to believe H , part of what brought it about that S has this justification is the independent justification that S had to disbelieve skeptical hypotheses like K . So, since independent justification to believe $\neg K$ is a necessary ingredient in virtue of which S gets to have justification to believe things like H , it's of course going to be (necessarily) true that whenever S has justification to believe H , S will also have independent justification to believe $\neg K$; after all, without such independent justification to believe $\neg K$, S would be missing an essential part of what brings it about that S has justification to believe H , and hence S *wouldn't* have justification to believe H .

4 Silins's explanation of C

It's rather less clear how Silins can explain the truth of **C**. Since Silins is a Liberal, he can't appeal to the explanation given by the Conservation in Sect. 3. For a Liberal, independent justification to believe $\neg K$ isn't (or needn't be) part of what brings it about that S has justification to believe H ; for a Liberal, E can justify S in believing H *all by itself*, without any essential role being played by any independent justification that S has to believe $\neg K$.

Silins agrees that he owes such an explanation, and, indeed, he provides one.⁵ According to Silins, the truth of **C** can be explained by the fact that **C** is the conclusion of the following sound argument:⁶

⁵ Silins (2008, pp. 132–133).

⁶ I've slightly modified Silins's version of the argument for clarity, but no essential role is being played by the modifications.

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- (1) If S has E , and E gives S justification to believe H , then S lacks justification to believe that K is true.
 - (2) If S lacks justification to believe that K is true, then S has independent justification to believe $\neg K$.
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C \therefore If S has E , and E gives S justification to believe H , then S has independent justification to believe $\neg K$.

The argument above is clearly valid, but why think that it is sound? Silins defends (1) by appeal to the fairly uncontroversial claim that the justification that E provides for H is defeasible, and would be defeated by any positive reason that S had to believe K . If S did have positive reason to believe K , Liberal and Conservative alike agree that the justification that E provides S to believe H would be defeated, and hence E wouldn't provide S with justification to believe H . Silins defends (2) by appealing to the thesis that S has justification to believe claims like $\neg K$ "by default"—i.e., without having to do anything at all to earn it. But what it is to have justification by default to believe $\neg K$ is just to be such that you're justified in believing $\neg K$ as long as your default justification isn't defeated by some reason to believe that $\neg K$ is false (i.e., that K is true). So, if S indeed has default justification to believe $\neg K$, and she doesn't have any defeater for that justification in the form of a reason to believe that K is true, then S will have justification to believe $\neg K$ (and this justification will be appropriately independent of E).

In other words, suppose that I "start off" at $t1$ lacking justification to believe that K is true. Since I have default justification to believe $\neg K$ and no defeating justification to believe that K is true, I'm starting off at $t1$ in a state where I'm all-things-considered justified in believing $\neg K$. Then, at $t2$, I come to acquire a justification to believe K , which does two things. First, it defeats the (default) justification I had at $t1$ to believe $\neg K$. And second, it makes it the case that E no longer gives me justification to believe H , since even the Liberal agrees that E can't give me justification to believe H if I'm in possession of a justification to believe K . So, whenever I have justification to believe H on the basis of E , it's also the case that I have justification to believe $\neg K$. But, according to Silins, that's only because my having justification to believe H on the basis of E entails that I'm not in possession of a justification to believe K , which in turn entails that I am justified in believing $\neg K$. According to Silins, it's *not* because my justification to believe $\neg K$ plays any essential role in bringing it about that I'm justified in believing H on the basis of E .

My worry about Silins's defense of (2) is that it seems to be insensitive to the distinction between so-called "undercutting" and "opposing"⁷ defeat. Suppose I (justifiably) believe that it is raining on the basis of Mary's testimony that it is raining. *One* way for that testimonial justification to be defeated is for me to acquire

⁷ This latter term is Pryor's, which I picked up from him in conversation. I prefer it to the standard "rebutting" terminology, since "opposing" correctly connotes that such defeat can be partial. See my [Kotzen] ms for a much more detailed discussion of undercutting and opposing defeat in a graded-belief context.

some reason to believe that it is not raining—say, by hearing Fred's testimony that it is not raining. This is an **opposing** defeater. But another way for my testimonial justification to believe that it is raining to be defeated is for me to learn something that impugns the reliability of Mary's testimony—say, Fred's testimony that Mary is a pathological liar. This testimony about Mary being a pathological liar isn't directly any justification for me to believe that it's not raining out; rather, it merely undermines the testimonial justification that I had (from Mary) to believe that it is raining out. This is an **undercutting** defeater.

Now, suppose that, just as my testimonial justification to believe that it's raining out can have two different types of defeaters, so too can S 's default justification to believe $\neg K$ have two different types of defeaters. And suppose that, just as Fred's testimony that Mary is a pathological liar can undercut my testimonial justification to believe that it's raining out without itself constituting a justification to believe that it's not raining out, so too can some undercutting defeater defeat S 's default justification to believe $\neg K$ without constituting a reason to believe K . Then, S would lack a justification to believe that K is true, but would also lack a justification to believe $\neg K$. So S would be a counterexample to (2).

Now, perhaps Silins could give us a reason to think that, even though justifications in general can be defeated either by being opposed or by being undercut, *default* justifications are special in that they can be defeated only by being opposed, and never by being merely undercut. But Silins hasn't provided such an argument, and he owes us one; if default justifications can be undercut (without also being opposed), then his (2) is false. And if (2) is false, then Silins is unable to explain the truth of **C**, in which case we ought to prefer either Pryor-style Liberalism (which doesn't owe us an explanation of the truth of **C**) or Conservatism (which does owe us an explanation of the truth of **C**, but is capable of providing us with a satisfying one).

5 A response

Here's one response that Silins might give:⁸ The difference between a default justification to believe p and a non-default justification to believe p is that whereas a non-default justification to believe p is a justification that you have in virtue of having a *reason* to believe p , default justification to believe p is a justification that you have to believe p even in the absence of a reason to believe p . And an undercutting defeater for a belief that p works by somehow undermining the subject's reason for believing p ; in my example above, Fred's testimony that Mary is a pathological liar is an undercutting defeater of my justification to believe that it's raining out precisely because this testimony undermines my reason for believing that it is raining (i.e., Mary's testimony that it is raining). But if I have a default justification to believe p , then I have justification to believe p without having any reason to believe p , and hence there is no reason to be undermined, and hence my default justification cannot be undercut (though it can of course be opposed if I were

⁸ Thanks to Stew Cohen for suggesting this line of response.

to acquire a reason to believe $\neg p$). Thus, whereas non-default justifications can be defeated either by being opposed or by being undercut, default justifications can only be opposed, and can never be undercut. So (2) is true after all, and Silins's explanation of **C** succeeds.

There are two problems with this response.

The first is that characterizing default justification for p as "justification that you have to believe p even in the absence of a reason to believe p " is controversial. Silins himself characterizes the claim that we have default justification to reject skeptical hypotheses this way: "whenever one has no reason to suspect that a skeptical hypothesis is true, one has reason to reject the hypothesis."⁹ On this understanding, default justification to reject skeptical hypotheses *does* furnish us with a reason to reject skeptical hypotheses; it's just that all we need to do to have that reason is to lack a reason to believe the skeptical hypothesis. And there are some benefits of this understanding of default justification over one according to which default justification is reasonless justification; it's very natural to think that rationality involves believing things for good reasons, and if having default justification to believe p is supposed to make it rational to believe p , then it's hard to see how default justification could be reasonless justification. Of course, this consideration isn't decisive, and it's beyond the scope of this paper to provide a general account either of default justification or of the connection between rationality and reasons. But it would be a significant cost of Silins's view if it turns out that it can be sustained only if the correct account of default justification is one according to which default justification is reasonless justification.

Second, we can generate some apparent examples of undercutting defeaters of default justifications. Suppose that I have a default justification to believe that I'm not a BIV. Then I read a paper persuasively arguing that there's no such thing as default justifications, so the paper's argument is for a false conclusion, but let's assume that the paper is good enough that it furnishes me with justification to believe that there are no default justifications.) Intuitively, wouldn't the argument of the paper count as an undercutting defeater of my default justification to believe that I'm not a BIV? The paper's conclusion isn't that I am a BIV, so the paper doesn't seem to give me any reason (as an opposing defeater would) to believe that I am a BIV. It just undermines the default justification that I have to believe that I'm not a BIV, by giving me a reason to believe that there are no default justifications, and hence that I don't have default justification to believe that I'm not a BIV. Contrast this case with one where I experience a scroll across my visual field reading "You're a BIV"; intuitively, that would provide opposing defeat for my justification to believe that I'm not a BIV, by actually giving me justification to believe that I am a BIV.

One might worry that this case is actually an example of a "higher-order" defeater rather than a "first-order" defeater—i.e., that it's a case where it's my justification to believe the higher-order proposition **that I'm justified in believing that I'm a BIV** that is being defeated, rather than my justification to believe the first-order proposition **that I'm a BIV**. But I think it's very hard to say what makes

⁹ Silins (2008, p. 114).

the undercutting defeater under consideration more “higher-order” than any other undercutting defeater. Even our paradigm case of an undercutting defeater—Fred’s testimony that Mary is a pathological liar—is arguably a case where’s it’s justification for the proposition **that I’m justified (by Mary’s testimony) in believing that it’s raining** that is being defeated in the first instance. Of course, the very strong intuition in that case is that even if that’s true, Fred’s testimony still undercuts the justification that I have to believe **that it’s raining** (perhaps even *precisely because* it defeats the justification I have for the higher-order proposition); unless I have some reason to mistrust Fred, it seems that his testimony that Mary is a pathological liar would have to undermine my reasons to believe what Mary tells me. And nothing changes if we assume (to make the Fred/Mary case more analogous with the BIV case) that Mary in fact *isn’t* a pathological liar, and that Fred is just playing a joke on me. Even Fred’s misleading, joking testimony that Mary is a liar undercuts my justification to believe what Mary says (i.e., that it’s raining), as long as I’m not aware of the joke. In just the same way, even a misleading paper that gives me reason to believe that there’s no such thing as default justification undercuts my default justification to believe that I’m not a BIV, just so long as I’m not aware of the fact that the paper is misleading (which we’re assuming).

Of course, higher-order defeaters are tricky, and it’s highly controversial and beyond the scope of this paper to sort out how second-order defeat interacts in general with first-order justification. But two final points are in order. First, there does seem to be a growing consensus that higher-order defeaters do undercut first-order justification in the sorts of cases I’ve been considering.¹⁰ Second, this is not just a terminological issue. I don’t care whether we count higher-order defeat in general as “undercutting” or not. The issue is whether (2) is true, which turns on whether your default justification to believe p can be defeated by something which doesn’t also give you a reason to believe $\neg p$. I’ve argued that it can. Silins’s explanation of **C** essentially depends on the view that it cannot.

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¹⁰ See, e.g., Christensen (2007), Elga (2007), Feldman (2006, 2007). For variations on the opposing view, see Kelly (2005, 2010).

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