

# Constructing a Comprehensively Anti-Justificationist Position

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## 1 Introduction

The central epistemological problem in a justificationist philosophy is that of justification. This is the problem of how we can justify our theories or beliefs. Virtually all philosophical systems in the Western tradition, from the time of Descartes until the twentieth century, have been justificationist ones. These philosophies can be distinguished by the different ways in which they solve the problem of justification. The revolutionary nature of Popper's thought is due to the fact that he removed the problem of justification from its central position in epistemology and replaced it with the problem of criticism, that is to say, the question of how theories can be criticized. By doing this he showed that the problem of justification is irrelevant to epistemology (Popper 1983, Part I, § 2(I)). Popper criticized many aspects of justificationism in his first published book (Popper 1935), but he was not fully aware of just how radical he was being. In that book Popper was particularly interested in the problems of induction and demarcation and he developed his solutions partly in the context of a debate with several logical positivists, especially Carnap, who were thoroughly justificationist in their thinking. It was Bartley, in the 1960s, who realized that Popper's originality was not restricted to solving particular problems, like that of induction and demarcation, but involved a thoroughgoing re-orientation of the problem situation in epistemology.

Bartley was interested in the problem of the limits of rationality and his discussion of this is largely conducted in the context of a debate with various liberal theologians who made much use of the *tu quoque* (you too) or boomerang argument. One version of this goes as follows: '(1) [For] certain logical reasons, rationality is so limited that *everyone* has to make a dogmatic irrational commitment; (2) therefore, the Christian has a right to make whatever commitment he pleases; and (3) therefore, no one has a right to criticize him for this' (Bartley 1962, p. 90). This argument is persuasive only if a justificationist conception of knowledge is presupposed. Bartley also thought that there were remnants of justificationism in Popper's critical rationalism, which led to what he saw as Popper's fideism. This emerges in Popper's discussion of rationality where, unable to justify his critical rationalism logically, he says

that his minimal concession to irrationalism is to make a decision to believe in reason (Popper 1945b, Chapter 24, § II). In forging his comprehensively critical rationalism, later rechristened ‘pancritical rationalism’, Bartley sought to present a solution to the problem of rationality free from any taint of justificationism. It is not surprising, therefore, that the term ‘anti-justificationism’ was used to describe his views (Watkins 1969, p. 60).

Bartley’s anti-justificationist ideas came to be accepted by many in the Popper camp, including Watkins, Agassi, and Lakatos (Bartley 1962, p. 157), though some later recanted. As Bartley’s ideas spread, differences of emphasis began to emerge and various facets of anti-justificationism were stressed by different thinkers. Disputes arose between people who actually had a great deal in common. The purpose of this paper is to present a systematic account of anti-justificationism. I hope thereby to show that the debate between justificationism and anti-justificationism is far more important than arguments within anti-justificationism. I start by characterizing justificationism, mentioning some of the criticisms that have been brought against it, and then I characterize anti-justificationism. Having a clear characterization of anti-justificationism it is easier to see what distinguishes it from justificationist philosophies and this enables me to present a novel argument showing the superiority of anti-justificationism. (I do not wish to suggest that all conceivable epistemologies are either justificationist or anti-justificationist ones, but I do not have the space to consider other approaches here.)

## 2 Justificationism

I am not trying to answer the question, ‘What is justificationism?’ I agree with Popper that such questions are not helpful. Instead, I identify the main features of justificationism.

(1) In justificationism knowledge is defined to be justified true belief. This is known as the *standard analysis* and Bartley takes it to be the unique determining feature of justificationism (Bartley 1962, pp. 172f.). Not only do justificationists accept the standard analysis, they also think that this definition is important and many of them have been seriously troubled by examples that show that it is flawed (Gettier 1967). Recently, however, Wright has sought to draw the sting of Gettier’s counterexamples by conceding that ‘knowledge is not really the proper concern of epistemological-sceptical enquiry’ (Wright 1991, p. 88). He explains, ‘We can live with the concession that we do not, strictly *know* some of the things we believed ourselves to know, provided we can retain the thought that we are fully justified in accepting them.’ Thus, Wright accepts the standard analysis and the validity of Gettier’s counterexamples, but is not troubled by them. This is because he thinks that epistemologists should be concerned with justified true belief even if this is not knowledge! Wright’s approach to epistemology shows that he regards the standard analysis as a real or, what Popper calls, an essent-

ialist definition (Popper 1945b, Chapter 11, § II). When people ask what-is? questions, they are looking for real definitions. The standard analysis arises when philosophers take the pseudo-problem, ‘What is knowledge?’, seriously. Popper, and most anti-justificationists, do not accept the existence of real definitions.

(2) One consequence of the standard analysis is that knowledge is taken to be something subjective. Thus, the epistemological focus for justificationism is the knowledge that some individual or other possesses. There is, certainly, knowledge in this sense, but Popper has persuasively argued that it is not the primary concern of epistemology. Instead, he argues that the study of objective knowledge should be the primary focus of philosophy (Popper 1972, Chapters 3 and 4). Popper follows such thinkers as Frege and Bolzano in singing the praises of objective knowledge. Such knowledge has many advantages over the subjective variety. For example, objective knowledge can stand in logical relations to other objective knowledge, whereas subjective knowledge cannot. Objective knowledge can be grasped by many people, whereas an individual’s subjective knowledge is unique to that individual. Objective knowledge has a permanence that fleeting subjective knowledge does not have.

(3) Another consequence of the standard analysis is that knowledge is understood as being certain. This has led many epistemologists to engage in what Popper, following Dewey, calls ‘the quest for certainty’ (Popper 1972, Chapter 2, § 13). Lakatos, in comments he made at the 1966 Denver Colloquium, describes how the quest for certainty, rigorously applied by a justificationist empiricist, continually diminishes the class of things that can be known for certain (Lakatos 1970, p. 221):

[Justificationism] inexorably leads to a step by step reduction of the field of rational inquiry. The most important pattern of such reduction is this: First cast doubt on any source of indubitable knowledge about the world except for sense-experience and arrive at (realistic) empiricism; then cast doubt on whether sense-experience was a proof of the external world and slip into solipsism; then cast doubt on the coherence of your ego and replace solipsism by the mist of ‘fleeting bundles of perception’ — the infinite abyss of doubt leaves one with nothing spared.

Anti-justificationists can have a lot of fun with any philosopher who claims that a particular class of statements or some specific proposition is certain and, therefore, immune from criticism, because, with a little effort, luck, and creativity, it is possible to find a way of criticizing any given statement.

(4) In the standard analysis knowledge is defined to be justified true belief. A justification involves three components, namely the foundational statements that form the premises of the justification, the collection of acceptable logical procedures or rules of inference that allow the conclusion or statement being justified to be inferred from the foundational statements and a non-logical and non-linguistic rational authority that establishes the truth of the founda-

tional statements. A specific justificationist philosophy is obtained by choosing a particular rational authority that validates foundational statements and by choosing the collection of allowable logical procedures. The choice of rational authority then determines the class of foundational statements. The reason why justificationists need such a rational authority is in order to ensure that justifications contain only a finite number of steps. This is how they prevent the occurrence of an infinite regress of reasons. There are, however, other ways of dealing with the threat of such an infinite regress (Armstrong 1973, pp. 150-161; Bartley 1962, pp. 211-216), but I do not have the space to discuss them here. The currently most popular version of justificationism is empiricism. Here, the rational authority is sense experience or observation and the class of foundational statements consists of those that can be validated by sense experience or observation. Concerning the collection of acceptable inference rules, most empiricists in the 20th century have accepted the rules of classical, bivalent logic, though in recent years the work of Dummett and other anti-realists have made intuitionistic logic fashionable. Furthermore, justificationist empiricists accept some form of induction as a legitimate way of inferring conclusions from premises in justifications.

In recent years the idea of justification has become increasingly important in analytical philosophy. I shall only quote a few representative opinions on the matter (Williamson 1997, p. 717; Aspenson 1998, p. 28; Swinburne 2001, p. 1). It should be noted that, although Williamson acknowledges that the trend in analytical philosophy is for philosophers to occupy themselves increasingly with issues relating to justification, this is not a trend he favours.

Tradition has it that the main problems of philosophy include the nature of knowledge. But, in recent decades, questions of knowledge seem to have been marginalized by questions of justification.

Though epistemologists talk a good deal about knowledge, they talk much more about *justification*, that is, about the varieties of good reasons for believing something.

‘Justification’ is a central notion in contemporary epistemology in the analytic tradition. Epistemologists are concerned with the kind of justification that is indicative of truth.

Many more passages could be quoted to show just how much the idea of justification dominates the study of epistemology by analytical philosophers, but these should be sufficient.

Many introductory texts on informal logic are written from a justificationist perspective and as a consequence of this they give incorrect advice. In one such text we find the maxim (Gilbert 1979/1996, p. 32):

*Always attack the reasons for a claim, not the claim itself.*

(Anti-justificationists, by contrast, would directly criticize any claims they objected to.) The author of the text himself, however, clearly states the limitations of his advice (ibidem, p. 34):

Someone who believes something without reason is being irrational. In terms of argument, being rational means providing reasons for belief. In the end all of us may be irrational, since sooner or later we reach a point of ultimate beliefs (for which it is impossible to provide reasons).

This admission comes from a person who is upholding and advocating rationalism! His honest comment reveals the tensions inherent in justificationism.

There are also other ways of criticizing the idea of a justification. For example, Popper criticized the validity of induction, which plays a large part in justificationist empiricism, and he criticized also the idea that sense experience or observation can confer certainty on foundational statements.

(5) In justificationism criticism is fused with justification. Bartley was the first to realize this (Bartley 1962/1984, p. 261, note 1). He distinguished two ways in which such criticism can operate. In the first a theory is rejected if it cannot be justified from the acceptable foundational statements and in the second a theory is rejected if it conflicts with justified statements (Bartley *ibidem*, pp. 142-144).

(6) Because a justification has to proceed from a collection of foundational statements that cannot themselves be justified logically, the collection of foundational statements has to be thought of as being immune from criticism. Justificationists, therefore, are forced to admit that some propositions cannot be criticized.

(7) Because of the way knowledge is defined in the standard analysis, it must be certain. This means that knowledge can grow only in a non-evolutionary and non-revolutionary manner. This is because, if something is granted the status of knowledge, then, as it is certainly true, there is no way that it could turn out to be false. Thus, once something is accepted as knowledge, it remains knowledge forever. If knowledge is seen to grow in an evolutionary or revolutionary manner, by contrast, successor theories contradict their predecessors and thus the predecessor theories could not have been correct. In fact, a safe assumption to make for anyone who accepts an evolutionary or revolutionary theory of the growth of knowledge is that all scientific theories are false. Justificationists, however, abide by the principle that all genuinely scientific theories must be true.

### **3 Anti-justificationism**

It is important to stress that anti-justificationism is not obtained by negating justificationism. Anti-justificationism was created by certain philosophers providing better solutions to the genuine epistemological and methodological problems that justificationism attempts to solve. Anti-justificationism does not try to solve all the problems that justificationism does because some of these are pseudo-problems. These it exposes as not being real problems. Therefore, in order to characterize anti-justificationism, it is not possible to go through the features of justificationism listed above and simply state the

corresponding aspect of anti-justificationism. Thus, I will label the main properties of anti-justificationism using the capital letters (A), (B), (C) and so on.

(A) Anti-justificationists do not try to define knowledge. This is because of their views about definition rather than any specific opinion about knowledge.

(B) Anti-justificationists are, following Popper, primarily interested in objective knowledge. Although not all anti-justificationists follow Popper in accepting the reality of World 3, they all think that the objective content of a theory is far more important than any particular individual's subjective understanding of that theory.

(C) Not only do anti-justificationists focus primarily on objective knowledge, they also agree with Popper that such knowledge is conjectural, fallible, and revisable. Knowledge is not thought of as being certain, but rather as being tentative and hypothetical.

(D) Because they deny that certain knowledge exists, anti-justificationists are not engaged in a quest for certainty. What they are primarily interested in are true theories and, thus, they replace the quest for certainty with a quest for truth. Rather than trying to justify their beliefs, they endeavour to devise better theories to solve the problems they are interested in.

(E) Anti-justificationism is anti-authoritarian. Recall the idea of a justification of some statement. This is a logical argument that has that statement as its conclusion and whose premises are either foundational statements, which are validated by some rational authority, such as sense experience, or statements that can be logically inferred from such foundational statements. As criticism is fused with justification, the collection of foundational statements cannot be subjected to criticism. Anti-justificationism is anti-authoritarian in the sense that everything can be criticized. There is no privileged class of propositions that are beyond criticism. There are no infallible authorities.

(F) Justificationists and anti-justificationists have very different ideas about criticism. The way in which a justificationist empiricist, for example, criticizes a theory is either by showing that it does not follow from observation statements or by showing that it does not conflict with observation statements. Anti-justificationists, by contrast, have a different conception of criticism and use various strategies in order to criticize theories. In justificationism emphasis is placed on proving the correctness of what you believe. Therefore, not a lot of thought has been expended by justificationists on the manifold ways in which theories can be criticized. One of the many strengths of anti-justificationism is that it employs a wide selection of methods of criticism. Because of this, I devote a considerable amount of space to discussing anti-justificationist methods of criticism:

(i) One way of criticizing a theory is to ask, 'Is this theory consistent?' If we discover that a theory is inconsistent, then the inconsistency needs to be removed. Although people sometimes work with inconsistent theories, this is

just a stop-gap measure until the source of the inconsistency can be located and a more acceptable solution found.

(ii) Another method of criticizing a theory is to ask, ‘What problem is this theory intended to solve?’ According to Popper, theories are put forward in order to solve problems and one way to criticize a theory is to show that it does not solve a genuine problem.

(iii) A further method of criticizing a theory put forward to solve a real problem is to ask, ‘Does this theory successfully solve the problem it was put forward to solve?’ Even if a theory is put forward in order to solve a genuine problem, it may be that it does not solve it very well.

Item (i) corresponds to the check of logic (Bartley 1962, p. 158) and items (ii) and (iii) elaborate the check of the problem (Bartley *ibidem*, p. 159).

The methods of criticism mentioned so far can be applied to any type of theory, but there are differences between the way in which empirical, mathematical, and metaphysical theories are criticized. The following ways of criticism are some of those that can be used against empirical theories:

(iv) One way of criticizing an empirical theory is to ask, ‘Is this theory consistent with observed facts?’ If a theory, together with some initial conditions, entails a prediction that is contradicted by an observation report, then that theory has been falsified, unless we have good reasons to think that either the initial conditions or the observation report are at fault.

(v) Another way of criticizing an empirical theory is to ask, ‘Is this theory better than its rivals?’ Even if a group of two or more theories are all consistent, have all adequately solved the same problems and none of them has been falsified, it may still be possible to think that one of the theories is better than its rivals. We may decide, for example, to pick the simplest theory.

(vi) A further way of criticizing an empirical theory is to ask, ‘Is this theory in conflict with some other scientific theory that has survived a lot of criticism?’ If there is a conflict of some sort, then either we have to give up or modify the proposed theory or else we have to give up the other theory. In order to decide what to do we would need to subject both theories to further criticism.

(vii) Yet another way of criticizing an empirical theory is to ask, ‘Is this theory in conflict with the methodology of its parent discipline?’ If there is a conflict, then either the theory or the methodology has to go, but we would need to submit both to further criticism in order to decide which it is.

(viii) A further method of criticizing an empirical theory is to ask, ‘Is this theory in conflict with some elements of the dominant cultural world view?’ This method of criticism is analogous to that in which there is a conflict between a newly introduced empirical theory and an old, established empirical theory. In fact, whether the older theory is empirical or metaphysical should not matter. What is important is how well the older theory has stood up to

criticism. If the older theory happens to be non-empirical, but it has withstood rational criticism, then a conflict between it and a fledging theory is important. If there is such a conflict, then either the theory or the element of the world view involved has to give way. To decide which we would have to submit both to further criticism.

Item (iv) is the check of sense experience and (v) is the check of scientific theory (Bartley 1962, pp. 158f.). Items (vi), (vii), and (viii) are based on Laudan's analysis of conceptual problems (Laudan 1977, Chapter 2). Although he is not a Popperian, some of Laudan's views on the ways in which theories can be criticized can profitably be incorporated into anti-justificationism.

(G) Anti-justificationists agree with Popper that the origins of a theory are irrelevant to its truth (Popper 1994, Chapter 1, § XIII). The consequences of a theory are far more important in the task of assessing its value.

(H) Anti-justificationists agree with Popper that science begins with problems.

(I) Anti-justificationists see knowledge as growing in an evolutionary or revolutionary manner. I do not distinguish between these as the key feature of each of them is that new theories are propounded that contradict existing theories.

(J) Proliferation is encouraged in anti-justificationism. It is thought by many that Feyerabend is the originator of the idea that proliferation of theories is beneficial to the growth of science and knowledge in general. It is true that Feyerabend proposed a principle of proliferation around 1965, which Preston quotes as, 'Invent, and elaborate, theories which are inconsistent with the accepted point of view, even if the latter should happen to be highly confirmed and generally accepted' (Preston 1997, p. 138). Popper (1945a, § 32), however, was singing the praises of proliferation many years before Feyerabend.

[We] must realise that with the best institutional organisation in the world, scientific progress may one day stop. There may, for example, be an epidemic of mysticism. This is certainly possible, for since some intellectuals *do* react to scientific progress by withdrawing into mysticism, everyone *might* react in this way. Such a possibility may perhaps be counteracted by devising a further set of social institutions, such as educational institutions, to discourage uniformity of outlook and encourage diversity.

Furthermore, in his later years Popper frequently wrote about his tetradic schema of problem solving. The benefits of proliferation are clear in those versions of this schema in which several theories are proposed as solutions to a single problem (Popper 1972, Chapter 6, § XVIII(8)).

#### 4 Prospering in the scientific marketplace

Whereas many philosophers have written about the fact that scientists sometimes work with several competing theories, the fact that members of the



scientific community accept several different methodologies is not discussed nearly so frequently. It is not the case that there is a single methodology that all scientists accept. Some scientists accept justificationism and some accept anti-justificationism. (There are probably others who accept non-justificationist methodologies other than anti-justificationism. To simplify my argument I ignore this possibility.) Whereas this poses a real problem for justificationists, anti-justificationists can take it in their stride. The considerations that I am about to present constitute an *ad hominem* argument, that is to say, I draw out unacceptable consequences for justificationists on the assumption that their views about knowledge and methodology are correct. In connection with the other arguments that have been put forward against justificationism (some of which have been briefly mentioned or alluded to above) I think that this constitutes a refutation of justificationist empiricism.

Although individual scientists have their own goals and aims, the aim of science is the production of true explanatory and predictive theories. In doing their work scientists have to make use of information that was obtained from other people. On the whole justificationist empiricists see scientific knowledge as growing through a non-evolutionary process of accumulation. What is important to them is that this knowledge was obtained using a fairly reliable method. I am not suggesting that all justificationists are reliabilists or that they all accept a reliability theory of knowledge. What I am saying is that they all accept some form of the inductive method and they think that knowledge that is obtained by means of this method is generally reliable. For them the pedigree of a piece of information is of crucial importance.

Anti-justificationists see things very differently. For them the way in which a theory is produced is irrelevant from an epistemological or methodological point of view, though it may be interesting from a psychological perspective. What is important for them is how a theory is criticized using methods that do not involve the attempt to justify it. Anti-justificationists disregard what they know about the origins of a theory when they are involved in the task of assessing the value of that theory. If they come across a theory that is claimed by its author to have been produced using an inductive method, they disregard this information when they are criticizing that theory. They are prepared to entertain, and even accept, a theory allegedly obtained by using the inductive method just as much as one obtained in any other way. Hence, the existence of justificationists in the scientific community presents no epistemological problems. Their presence slows down scientific progress and acceptance of their methodology creates the illusion that scientific knowledge is especially reliable, but anti-justificationists can accommodate themselves to these things. They are willing to consider the theories propounded by justificationists on their merits irrespective of their origins. They consider the time justificationists spent arguing for their theories inductively as having been wasted. They would have taken the theory seriously, if it had intrinsic merit, even if there were no such argumentation present.

Justificationists, however, have real difficulties accommodating the existence of anti-justificationists in the scientific community. Anti-justificationists propound theories and then they try to falsify them. They spend much of their time criticizing theories rather than trying to establish them conclusively. They are not concerned with the origins of their theories nor do they claim they have a pure pedigree. Yet sometimes their theories are generally accepted and become, for a time at least, part of the fabric of knowledge. The way in which they work ensures that the knowledge they produce does not have a pure pedigree. Justificationists have to make use of knowledge produced by other people, but they cannot ascertain the pedigree of every piece of information that they use. Their goal of adding a few stones to the growing edifice of scientific knowledge is undermined by the fact that anti-justificationists build in the air. The presence of anti-justificationists spoils the pedigree, for justificationists, of a great deal of scientific knowledge and, from their point of view, they cannot always know which pieces of information have been infected. For justificationists, if they thought the matter through, this state of affairs would be intolerable. Thus, in a community of scientists using different methodologies, anti-justificationists have a definite advantage.

## **5 Conclusion**

In this paper I have made a start on the task of providing a systematic characterization of anti-justificationism, which, amongst other things, rejects the idea that justification is central to philosophy. It is, thus, fundamentally opposed to the analytical tradition of philosophy. I argued above that justificationist scientists, if they thought the matter through, would find the presence of anti-justificationists in the scientific community intolerable. Most scientists, however, have not thought the matter through. Since justificationist philosophers are likely to have done so, this partly explains their hostility to anti-justificationists. Unable to answer their arguments they pretend they do not exist. I think it is a pity that anti-justificationists spend so much time criticizing each other on fairly minor points when there is so much that unites them. They have far more in common with each other than they have with analytical philosophers. By attempting to systematize anti-justificationism I hope to redraw some philosophical battle lines. Rather than these running through the anti-justificationist camp, they should lie between that camp and that of the justificationists. By trying to systematize anti-justificationism, I hope to make it easier for anti-justificationists to take on the analytical tradition. Analytical philosophy, the descendant of logical positivism, has done little to advance philosophy and it is, therefore, imperative, for the sake of philosophy, that it be attacked.

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