

Section 6: Epistemology & Metaphysics

CONSTRUCTING A COMPREHENSIVE ANTI-JUSTIFICATIONIST POSITION

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Popper and several philosophers influenced by him, including Bartley, Lakatos, Watkins and Jarvie, have criticised justificationism. Their accounts of its main alternative, sometimes called 'anti-justificationism', have been given in the context of polemical arguments and, thus, emphasise different aspects of anti-justificationism. In this paper my aim is to construct a comprehensive anti-justificationist position. I also sketch a novel argument for anti-justificationism.

In justificationism knowledge is defined as justified true belief. Thus, it is subjective and certain. Furthermore, justificationists tend to think that this definition is important. Popper opposes all this. He sees knowledge as being fallible, conjectural and subject to drastic revision. He is primarily interested in objective knowledge. He thinks that non-abbreviatory definitions are not important and sometimes downright harmful. Additional features of anti-justificationism have also on occasion been singled out by various people, including Popper himself, as being especially significant. These include: Researchers are engaged in a quest for truth and not certainty. Error cannot always be avoided and a scientist who has made a mistake is not always culpable. The consequences of a theory are more important than its origins. No source of knowledge is beyond criticism: observation statements, for example, do not form the foundation of science, but rather are used in the criticism of theories (and can themselves be criticised). Criticism and justification have to be sharply distinguished. A wide variety of critical methods need to be recognised. No principle or statement is immune from criticism. The proliferation of theories advances knowledge. Knowledge grows by means of an evolutionary process. Anti-justificationism has a tendency towards individualism and competition rather than communalism and solidarity. Anti-justificationism promotes pluralism and the open society. I combine and extend these partial accounts into a comprehensive and coherent anti-justificationist position. I also iron out any tensions that may exist between them.

My argument for anti-justificationism proceeds as follows. The members of the scientific community use a variety of methodologies in order to produce knowledge. In a pool of methodologies anti-justificationism has a definite competitive advantage. The anti-justificationist can tolerate the existence of justificationists in the scientific community, but the justificationist regards anti-justificationism as a pollutant which destroys the purity of scientific knowledge and which therefore must be removed. Unfortunately for him, anti-justificationists are valuable members of the scientific community and have produced important theories which are widely used.

I end by stressing the contemporary importance and continuing relevance of anti-justificationism in a world that is becoming increasingly dogmatic and intolerant.