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Misguided to Seek Justification?

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The Question

The question that this paper answers is three-fold:

A. Why might it seem misguided to seek justification?
B. Why might seeking justification still seem to be the thing to do?
C. Is seeking justification the thing to do?

For the purpose of this paper, the following was assumed regarding justification:

Justification for *p* is a defense of *p* that makes believing *p* is warranted. Justification isn't simply the argument you *offer* for *p* (whatever this argument is). In order for an argument to give you justification, it has to provide sufficient evidence that *p* is true.

Response to A:

There are several reasons to believe that it may be misguided to seek justification. The first stems from Descartes as he raises the problem of Cartesian Doubt. In light of Descartes, there are a few arguments that we can make for why it might seem misguided to seek justification. The first is the Doubting Dream argument. This argument states that there is no way to determine whether or not we are living in a dream or whether we are awake. For Descartes, our inability to distinguish between dreams and reality should call into question what we believe. The aim of this doubt is to undermine whether external objects produce this "sensation" of being awake when we are, in fact, not awake. For all we know, some subconscious faculty of the mind produces both sorts of experience. The upshot of this is that if I do not know that external objects produce the experience of waking up, then for all I know, all of my experiences might just be dreams. There might not even be an external world. The Dreaming Doubt argument, thus, raises the possibility of universal delusion. Justification then, if this skeptical argument were true, would be useless since the life we thought we were living would be a lie anyway.

The second argument Descartes raises is the Evil Genius argument. Descartes says that we should suppose that we are the creation of a powerful but malicious being. This evil genius has given us flawed cognitive abilities that cause us to be wrong about matters regarding epistemology. This argument serves as justification-defeating doubt because if the evil genius does indeed exist, then any justification we may have could just be the evil genius feeding us flawed things to believe.

The next argument for why justification might seem misguided comes from David Hume, who offers two forms of skepticism. The first form is skepticism about the possibility of metaphysical theories. The second form of skepticism is "moderate," or more commonly known as fallibilism. This form of skepticism is essentially recognition of our cognitive limitations and likelihood to commit cognitive errors. Hume seriously calls into question our ability to use inductive reasoning, which is problematic since a vast majority of our reasons rely on some form of induction. For Hume, causation is the basis of all our reasoning concerning matters of fact. Hume then makes an argument as to why causal inferences are not a priori, or due to reason. He states that all propositions are either relations of ideas or matters of fact. He then proceeds to claim that effects are distinct from the things that caused them, and thus causal reasoning cannot be a priori.

Next, Hume says that causes and effects are discovered, not by reason, but through experience because we find that particular causes are conjoined with the same effect. Often we don't acknowledge this because most of our causal judgments are so familiar to us that we just assume them to be true. Hume then proceeds to criticize probable reasoning by stating that it is based on the relation of cause and effect. We make inferences that the future will be like the past, but this use of inferences is exactly what Hume is criticizing. The impact of this argument is that it exhausts the ways reason might establish a connection between cause and effect.

Another argument that raises issue with seeking justification is the Gettier problem. For Gettier, there are cases where a belief is true and justified, but not an instance of knowledge because the belief is only true due to chance. Suppose a friend tells you that you have a test in your math class today. Your friend is a good student, and generally honest, so you believe her. It would appear as if you were fully justified in believing your friend was making an accurate statement because accessible to you are all the factors needed for your belief to be justified. Suppose then that your friend believes that there isn't actually a test, and that she is just playing a joke on you, when in reality there actually is a test. You end up with a true belief, but your belief is only true because of chance. This doesn't seem to be knowledge, then, because there needs to be a small gap between truth and the component of knowledge (which is added) to true belief in the definition (call this component 'Q'). In the case of your friend, Q has not closed the gap between itself and true belief.

One final reason why it might be misguided to seek justification is Meno's paradox. This paradox claims that if you know what you are looking for, inquiry is unnecessary. However, if you don't know what you're looking for, inquiry is impossible because you'd have no idea where to start looking. Therefore, inquiry is either unnecessary or impossible. This paradox, however, commits the fallacy of equivocation. In this paradox, the term "know" has two different meanings, and thus it is not a valid objection.

Response to B:

On the contrary, there are a few reasons why it might make sense to seek justification. Descartes' Cartesian Doubt was not meant to disprove everything, but rather to force us to seek the strongest argument possible and rid ourselves of all doubt. Knowledge, for Descartes, was very Platonic in that its purpose was to reveal a world of real beings illuminated by bright light (similar to Plato's Cave). Descartes was a foundationalist. Seeking justification might make sense for Descartes when pursued in this way. Imagine that you are building a house; you need not only a strong superstructure, but also a firm foundation. This is how Descartes pictured the pursuit of knowledge or justification. You need a foundation of unshakable first

principles and then a superstructure of further propositions anchored to the foundation via unshakable inference. Descartes takes "cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am) to be his foundational belief. Because Descartes could not doubt his own existence, he knew that it must be true that he existed. He then used this as the foundation for his project seeking justification.

One reason seeking justification may not be misguided stems from Hume's empiricism. All the materials of thinking, perceptions, are derived from other sensations, or from reflection. The process that produces our expectations of cause and effect is inherently causal. When I expect a fire to be warm, I am not conceptualizing its warmth; I believe that it will be warm. This belief requires that some facts be presented to my senses or memory. Therefore, being skeptical of everything does not make a lot of sense because there are some things we can know through experience and use to form other beliefs or justifications.

Response to C:

We have a normative obligation to seek epistemic justification. Imagine if we only ate when we were certain that it would nourish us. This would probably lead to starvation. The same is true in regard to seeking justification. As Hume acknowledges, "All human life must perish where his principles universally and steadily prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence."[1]

Some critics say that it's problematic to argue that we have a duty to seek justification that arises from the involuntariness of belief formation. There are several ways around this problem. First, we can reject the voluntariness principle if we were to find a similar scenario where obligations cannot be met, but remain obligations. Imagine a legal contract where I agree to pay you the money I owe you, plus interest. Imagine, then, that I lost all of my money by spending it on my necessities, and had nothing to pay you back. Despite the fact that I am no longer able to fulfill my obligation to you, that in no way nullifies the original obligation.

To phrase the criticism in a stronger manner, some authors claim: doxastic voluntarism, which is the belief that people have voluntary control over their beliefs, is false. If it's false, no one has epistemic obligations. Therefore, no one has epistemic obligations.

We can reject the first premise because, in some sense, we can control our beliefs indirectly. I can alter the ways in which I form beliefs. For example, by studying probability theory, I can limit the number of mistaken inferences that I draw.

The second premise can be rejected because there can be obligations regarding involuntary behavior. For example, imagine that your professor tells you what work you, as students of the class, will be obligated to do. If, later in the semester, you came to your professor and said you were unable to complete the work, your professor would almost certainly not respond with, "Well, if you can't do the work, you aren't required to do it." The same is true of seeking justification. Even if the end were not in sight, or finding truth were impossible, that would not rid me of my obligation to seek justification.

[1] *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume, 1748.