

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH INTERESTS

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The goal of my work as a philosopher is to defend the idea that the purpose of epistemology is to offer normative guidance to the individual knower.

This is sometimes identified as the “traditional” approach to epistemology—identified as such in contrast to the newer “naturalized” approach, which maintains that epistemologists seek only to explain the development of knowledge as third-party scientific observers (a view I critiqued in my dissertation). But when it emerged in the Enlightenment, the guidance conception of epistemology was revolutionary, insofar as it called on people to sweep aside the dogmas of the past and adopt a first-handed approach to knowing. I defend what might be termed a “neo-Enlightenment” epistemology, retaining the elements essential to the guidance conception, but shorn of the errors I take to have lent ammunition to the critics of the Enlightenment.

Essential to Descartes’ and Locke’s epistemologies, for instance, were each of the following theses: *foundationalism*, the view that the justification of our beliefs depends on basic unjustified justifiers; *internalism*, the view that one’s beliefs are justified by facts of which one is consciously aware and therefore to which one is accountable; *voluntarism*, the view that the inquirer can responsibly craft his or her own beliefs in such a way that they are subject to evaluation; and *evidentialism*, the view that beliefs formed on a basis other than the known relevant evidence are unjustified. Common to both Descartes and Locke, however, were assumptions that undercut their defense of these doctrines. (Most prominent among these was the *representationalist* theory of perception.) I have now written papers defending the first three of these components, while my statement on evidentialism is the latest work in progress. In what follows I briefly summarize and interrelate my recent contributions on each of these topics.

My defense of *foundationalism*, recently published in *Synthese* (2011), works by distinguishing foundationalism as such from the view as defended by early modern and 20th century empiricists. Their assumptions obscured how the senses could give data sufficiently rich to inform the foundations of knowledge, and failed to convey how concepts could package non-conceptual sensory data in a way cognitively relevant to the justification of beliefs. I argue that a direct realist account of perception, according to which we are directly aware of objects in the world rather than intermediate mental objects, points to perception as a rich form of awareness suitable to serve as an unjustified justifier. Anti-foundationalists assume that our conceptual life is not cognitively informed by the senses because concepts cannot be abstracted from the data of experience. I argue that it is precisely direct realism about perception (which anti-foundationalists like Sellars and McDowell otherwise embrace) which allows for a defense of abstractionism and furnishes a new, previously underappreciated case for foundationalism.

A guidance-oriented account of epistemology needs to defend *internalism*: our mental states can be meaningfully judged only when they result from our knowing what we are doing. Critics of internalism say that knowers have insufficient conscious access to the justifiers of our beliefs, and contend that the guidance conception of epistemology is flawed. But I argue that if direct realism is true, we have more access than externalists think. Not only do we have awareness of objects in the external world, but because we can have that awareness even though perception involves processing over time, we can

also have memorial awareness of the past—opening up a raft of justifiers previously thought to be inaccessible to the internalist. This helps us to see justification as an act of a responsible knower, an agent acting and enduring over time, and this suggests that a proper internalism is best articulated in virtue-epistemological terms.

Just as a knowing agent engages in acts of justification that occur over time, a believing agent's choices involve complex identities that unfold over time. My work on voluntarism is heavily indebted to my friend Gregory Salmieri, who first argued for a version of voluntarism involving a *de re* notion of belief choice, in which one chooses beliefs without full knowledge of their propositional contents. Being impressed by his idea, I decided to help co-author a paper accounting for belief choice in terms of the choice to engage various methods of inquiry, and according to which the choice of these mental actions implies a choice of beliefs, because mental actions partially constitute the mental state of belief. In a separate paper, I further enrich this conception of voluntarism by distinguishing it from compatibilist accounts of doxastic freedom. These accounts, championed by internalists I otherwise sympathize with, attempt to reduce the notion of epistemic responsibility to a kind of responsiveness to reasons. But I argue that these reductions end up depriving knowers of agency, either because they fail to distinguish responsibility from the type of responsiveness manifested in psychotic behavior, or because they assimilate responsibility to rationality, leaving no room for the possibility of irrationality (a concern for any guidance-oriented approach to epistemology).

My current work focuses on articulating a version of *evidentialism* that is consistent with the themes mentioned above. A batch of recent philosophers defends the so-called “conceptual” approach to evidentialism, according to which the concept of belief contains a norm of truth, such that someone believing against the evidence is not really believing. This position is usually associated with the rejection of voluntarism, as it is assumed that if one cannot consciously choose to believe against the evidence, one cannot choose one's beliefs. But I argue that one can choose to form *unjustified* beliefs—beliefs not fully justified by the evidence—by choosing to lower one's level of awareness and not appreciating the full scope of the evidence. Unjustified believers emerge as compartmentalized epistemic agents. Some claims, adopted wholly without concern for the evidence, do indeed fail to be beliefs (justified or not), and contribute to the wholesale fracturing of one's epistemic agency.

Of late my work on these four topics has begun to coalesce. I am fascinated by the internal connections among the doctrines, and how the neo-Enlightenment view that emerges is to be applied to other problems in philosophy—and beyond. Other research I've conducted applies this outlook to the philosophy of perception, the epistemology of testimony, and the philosophy of science. And an undergraduate textbook on logic, currently in draft form, bears the marks of this overall project, with the intent to provide suitably practical advice to students. I encourage you to sample samples of all of the above on my web site, www.benbayer.com.