

Except from Chapter 16, Olen, Jeffrey. *Persons and Their World: an Introduction to Philosophy*. New York: Random House, 1983.

The Justification Of Our Beliefs

By Jeffrey Olen

Knowledge, we saw, is *justified* true belief. A true belief can count as knowledge only if we have good grounds for accepting it. Otherwise, it is merely a lucky guess or an accident that we are right, and not knowledge. In this chapter, we will look at how we justify our beliefs. But first, we must make an important distinction—between our *reasons* for holding a belief, and the *causes* of our doing so.

Reasons And Causes

To give our justification for a particular belief is to answer the questions “Why do you believe that?” and “How do you know that?” If our justification is a good one, it shows that our belief is a rational one, and that it is more likely true than not. But notice, not all answers to the question “Why do you believe that?” are relevant to our justification. Some answers do nothing to show that the belief is more likely true than not. Suppose, for instance, that you are asked why you believe that Western-style liberal democracy is a better system of government than Soviet-style communism. Two types of answers, both true, can be given. First, you might say that you believe it because you grew up in America and were conditioned to believe it. Second, you might say that you believe it because you believe that the system of government that guarantees the greatest amount of freedom for all is the best system, and Western-style liberal democracy guarantees greater freedom than Soviet-style communism.

The first answer provides a *cause* of your belief, but it does not provide a *reason*. Although it mentions an undeniable factor in your coming to hold your belief, it does nothing to show that your belief is rational or correct, nor does it provide anyone else with a reason for agreeing with you. Certainly, if we were debating the question, your first answer would do nothing to convince me that you are right. The second answer, however, does provide a reason. It attempts to show that it is more reasonable to believe that liberal democracy is better than communism, that it is true that liberal democracy is the better system. It is precisely the sort of answer that you would give in a debate.

The difference between a cause and a reason is this: Although both answer the question “Why do you believe it?” only the second answers the question “Why is it rational for someone to believe it?” or “What considerations *support* your belief?” or “What other beliefs show that your belief is more likely true than not?”

In other words, to give your reasons for holding a belief is to offer an *argument*. It is to say, “I believe p because I believe q, r, and s; and if q, r, and s are true, then p is true also.” For example, I believe that it is now 11:30 because I believe that my watch says it is 11:30 and is correct, then it is true that it is 11:30. Similarly, I believe that it didn’t rain last night because I believe that the grass is not wet but would be wet if it had rained; and if it is true that the grass is not wet but would be wet if it had rained, then it is true that it did not rain. Thus, our interest in what follows will be in reasons rather than causes.

Justification Chains

In the ordinary course of events, the question “How do you know?” is usually given a short answer. How do I know the time? By my watch. How do I know that my sister is planning to visit me? She told me so. How do I know that Japan is in Asia? I learned it in school. Although these answers are usually sufficient in daily life, they do not really mark the end of the matter. Take the first answer—that I know the time by my watch. How do I know my watch is correct? Similarly, how do I know my sister told me the truth? How do I know that my teachers were right about Japan?

Each of these further questions has an answer, of course, but their answers raise still further questions. Suppose I say that I know my watch is correct because I checked it against the school clock. How do I know the school clock is correct? How do I know that I read my watch and the clock accurately when I compared them?

As we continue to spin out answers and questions, it becomes obvious that our justifications for believing what we do are far more complicated than we immediately realize. To give some idea of this complexity, let us take my belief that I had orange juice this morning. How do I know that?

Well, most obviously, I remember drinking it. But how did I know it was orange juice when I drank it? Well, it looked, tasted and smelled like orange juice. Also, it came from a can marked “orange juice.” But how did I know it looked, tasted and smelled like orange juice? Because I have seen, tasted, and smelled orange juice before, and the stuff I drank this morning looked, tasted, and smelled the same way. But how do I know that I remembered the look, taste, and smell accurately? And how do I know that all the other stuff I thought was orange juice really was orange juice? Moreover, how do I know the label on the can was honest?

At this point, my justification begins branching out in all sorts of directions. No doubt, I will mention various federal and state regulations, the reputation of the supermarket in which I bought the juice and of the company that produced it, other instances in which my memory of look, smell, and taste were accurate, the corroboration of my beliefs by other people, and so on—and all of these considerations will lead to still further ones.

Thus, even the simplest belief is justified in a number of complicated ways, involving a wide variety of beliefs about current and past experiences, all of them admitting of further justification. We can think of this series of questions and answers as a *justification chain*, or, more accurately, as a set of individual justification chains leading to the same belief. One chain runs through my beliefs about the look, taste, and smell of what I drank this morning and of the other things I thought to be orange juice, another through my beliefs about the label on the can and the reliability of the supermarket and producer. In turn, each of these chains breaks up into further chains, which will themselves break up into still further chains.

A few points about justification chains warrant immediate mention. First, every link in these chains is a *belief*. We justify the initial belief by appealing to other beliefs, and then justify these other beliefs by appealing to still other ones. That is why the chains can continue as they do. All beliefs are capable of justification, but the only way we can justify them is by appealing to other beliefs.

Second, the vast majority of beliefs in the chain are *not consciously entertained* when we accept the initial belief. While drinking my orange juice this morning, I gave no conscious thought whatever to the can it came in, federal regulations, or the smell of any other orange juice I’d had. Such beliefs came to the fore only when I began thinking in earnest about my justification.

Third, my own *observations* play a crucial role in such chains. Even if I must depend on the testimony of others in many cases for part of the justification of my beliefs, their testimony is still something that I hear or see, and my judgment about the reliability of any bit of testimony must depend on other observations of mine. If I believe what I learned in school, it is because my own

observations have confirmed many of the other things I learned in school. If I believe my sister when she tells me she's planning on visiting me, it is because my own observations have shown me that she can be trusted.

Fourth, the search for *explanations* also plays a crucial role in justification chains. That is, each link is connected to the next one by an *explanatory statement*. Take my beliefs that what I drank this morning was orange juice and that what I drank this morning tasted like orange juice. These two links are connected by the explanatory statement "What I drank this morning tasted like orange *because* it was orange juice." Likewise, the belief that what I drank was orange juice is connected to the belief that the label on the can said it was orange juice by the explanatory statement "The label said it was orange juice *because* it was orange juice."

This is no accident. If one belief serves as a reason for another, there must be some connection between the two beliefs that allows the one to serve as a reason for the other. Suppose, for example, I told you that my reason for believing that the Phillies beat the Cubs last night is that I slept until nine this morning. You would no doubt be very confused by that remark. But suppose I added this: I have a friend who is a Cubs fan and knows that I am a Phillies fan. If the Cubs had won she would have awakened me at six this morning to rub it in. In that case, you would no longer be confused. Why not? Because the Cubs' loss *explains* why I was not awakened at six.

Fifth, *generalizations* form an important part of justification chains. At each step along the way, we depend on statements beginning with such words as "all," "every," or "most." Why can I say that this liquid is orange juice because it looks, tastes, and smells like orange juice? Because I believe that anything (or almost anything) that looks, tastes, and smells like orange juice is orange juice. Why can I say that I slept until nine this morning because the Phillies beat the Cubs? Because I believe that whenever the Cubs beat the Phillies, my friend will call me at six the next morning.

The Web Of Belief

When we reflect on the large number of varied beliefs that belongs to any justification chain, it begins to look as though almost any belief can be involved in the justification of any other belief. It begins to seem that when we are asked how we know any one statement, we may eventually have to appeal to all of our other beliefs.

On the face of it, this seems absurd. After all, whenever we are asked how we know a particular thing, we can give a relatively short answer that will satisfy the asker. Also, it is difficult to see how all of my beliefs can be suitably connected. My belief that there is peanut butter in the house, for instance, seems totally unrelated to my belief that there is only one president of the United States. How could one be a part of the other's justification?

I can explain how with an example I often use with my students. At some point in class, I will "accidentally" bump into the table at the front of the room. I then write the following statements on the blackboard:

"I was fifteen feet away from the table."

"I can take no step longer than a yard."

"The table did not move."

"I took two steps."

"I bumped into the table."

Notice that the above statements are inconsistent. That is, not all of them can be true. At least one must be false. Either the table moved, or I took more than two steps, or I was closer than fifteen feet from the table, or I can take eight-foot steps, or I didn't bump into it.

Which is it?

Since my students saw that I was only about three feet away from the table, they all say that the first statement is the false one. If I agree with them, I can justify my belief as follows: Obviously, I was closer to the table than I'd thought, because I bumped into it after taking two steps, and I can take no step longer than a yard, and the table didn't move.

But why should I agree with them? I could do otherwise. I could say, for example, that I didn't really bump into the table—because I was fifteen feet away, took two steps, the table didn't move, and I can't take a step longer than a yard. Or I could say that the table must have moved—because I took two steps, am unable to take a step longer than a yard, was fifteen feet away from the table and bumped into it. Or I could say that I obviously can take a step over seven feet, or that I obviously took five steps. Why say that I was closer to the table than I'd thought?

No doubt, you are tempted to say that I *know* that the table didn't move, and that I *know* that I can't take eight-foot steps, and that I *know* that I only took two steps, and that I know that I bumped into the table. The problem with that answer is that I also thought I *knew* that I was fifteen feet away from it. Obviously, I have to admit that one of the things I thought I knew is false, but why the distance to the table? Because it is most *rational* to say that I was wrong about the distance. But why is that?

The question asks, in effect, what our standards of rationality are. When our beliefs conflict, how are we rationally to choose which one to reject? Our answer to this question will tell us something very important about the justification of our beliefs.

Why is it more rational to say I misjudged the distance to the table? Because it is more *likely* that I misjudged it than that I was wrong about the other beliefs. After all, people often misjudge distances, especially when their mind is on something else. So the hypothesis that I misjudged the distance had an *initial plausibility* compared with the other hypotheses.

What else? Well, my students saw what happened, and they say that I was less than fifteen feet away from the table. So this belief is corroborated by the testimony of others. If I were to disagree, I would need an explanation of their being wrong. Are they lying? If so, why all of them? Am I the victim of a conspiracy? Are they victims of a mass hallucination? Did someone drug the water supply? These questions demonstrate that the hypothesis that I misjudged the distance is the *simplest* one to accept. If I accept it, no further explanation is needed. If I reject it, a whole bundle of further explanations is required. So *simplicity* is an important factor.

Anything else? Well, suppose that I were to say that the table moved. But how? As I walked toward it, I could see everyone else in the room, and nobody was even close to the table. Did they move it by a concentration of mental energy? Or did the table move itself? But I don't believe that there is any such thing as mental energy that can move tables. If my students have such a power, how could they have acquired it? Do I have it? Does everyone? Why have I never seen it displayed? If there is such a thing, don't all my beliefs about the laws of nature have to be changed?

And if the table moved itself, why haven't I seen any other table move itself? What about chairs, typewriters, books, glasses of beer? Can they move themselves as well? Must all my beliefs about the difference between animate and "inanimate" objects be thrown out the window?

The point is this. If I agree that I misjudged the distance to the table, I need to change few, if any, of my other beliefs. But if I choose another alternative, the number of other beliefs that must be changed grows considerably. Indeed, if I were to say that the table moved itself, it would be difficult to find an end to the process. Who knows how many beliefs I would have to change before I removed all the inconsistencies? Therefore, *conservatism* is an important factor. We choose the hypothesis that requires the fewest changes in our other beliefs.

We are now in a position to see how it is that any belief can enter into the justification of any other belief. My beliefs form one huge network. Some are *particular* statements, that is, statements about individual things; others are *general* statements, that is, statements about entire

groups of things. The particular statements serve as *evidence* for the general ones. If I believe that this emerald is green and that emerald is green, and so on for every emerald I have seen, these particular beliefs provide evidence for the general belief that all emeralds are green. Moreover, the general statements serve to *explain* the particular ones. If I believe that all emeralds are green, that belief explains why this thing is green. It is green because it's an emerald, and all emeralds are green.

Furthermore, general beliefs serve as evidence and explanations for other general beliefs. If all gins make me drunk and all bourbons make me drunk and all vodkas make me drunk, that is evidence for the general statement that all liquors make me drunk. And the general statement that all liquors make me drunk explains why all gins make me drunk.

Let us think of this network of beliefs as a map. The particular beliefs are country roads and city streets. The general beliefs are major highways connecting the smaller streets, and the most general beliefs are the interstate highways connecting the other highways. In this way, the smallest dirt road in Oregon is connected to the narrowest back alley in New York. So, eventually, is my belief about the peanut butter in my house connected to my belief about there being only one president of the United States at a time.

Take my general belief that inanimate objects cannot move themselves. Think of all the objects in the world that are connected by that belief. Think also of the other beliefs I have about these objects that are connected to the belief that they are inanimate. How many of those must be changed if I decide that the table moved itself? How many other general beliefs will I have to give up if I change those particular beliefs? Then how many other particular beliefs? Where will the process end?

Of course, we don't think about such matters when we unexpectedly bump into a table. We just automatically conclude that the table was closer than we'd thought. But these matters explain why we automatically come to the decision. We do so because the experience of bumping into a table puts our entire network of beliefs on the line, and rather than create havoc in that network, we choose the simplest, most conservative hypothesis. That is how the entire network enters into our justification for every belief in that network. It is also why we give such short answers to the question "How do you know that?" Since the entire network is taken for granted, there is no reason to go too deeply into it. A short "by my watch" will suffice when asked how I know the time, just as a short "because I bumped into it" will suffice when asked how I know the table was closer than I'd thought.

Once we recognize all of this, we can see that the metaphor of the justification chain is a bit misleading. It makes the justification of beliefs seem like single lines, proceeding independently of one another in a single direction. Instead, the lines cross and merge and move every which way, as all of our beliefs help to justify one another.

Thus, a more apt metaphor, borrowed from the contemporary American philosopher W.V. Quine, is that of a vast *web* of belief. This metaphor emphasizes that justification is a matter of *explanatory coherence*. To say that is to say that a belief is justified if it fits well into the entire network. If it is consistent with other beliefs, provides evidence for other belief in the network, and is explained by other beliefs in the network, then we are justified in believing it. And when it comes to choosing between rival hypotheses, we are justified in believing the one that fits in the best. Since the hypothesis that I misjudged the distance to the table fits in better than any other hypothesis, that is the hypothesis I am justified in accepting. Indeed, it is because it fits better than the others that it has the initial plausibility it does.