

DEFEASIBLE *A PRIORI* JUSTIFICATION: A REPLY TO THUROW

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Joshua Thurow offers a defence of the claim that if a belief is defeasible by non-experiential evidence then it is defeasible by experiential evidence. He responds to an objection which I make against this claim, and offers two arguments in support of his own position. I show that Thurow's response misconstrues my objection, and that his supporting arguments fall short of their goal.

The goal of Joshua Thurow's recent paper 'Experientially Defeasible *A Priori* Justification'¹ is to defend the following argument:

1. Many *a priori* (or non-experientially) justified beliefs are defeasible by non-experiential evidence
2. If a belief is defeasible by non-experiential evidence then it is defeasible by experiential evidence
3. Therefore many *a priori* justified beliefs are defeasible by experiential evidence.

His defence, which focuses on premise (2), consists in 'arguing in §2 directly for premise (2) and responding to Casullo's objections, and secondly by arguing in §3 for the contrapositive of (2)'.² I shall argue that Thurow's response misconstrues my objection and that his positive arguments fall short of their goal. Since the objection which he considers is taken out of its original dialectical context, some background is necessary to set the stage for my response.

1. *The background*

In my book *A Priori Justification* I defend the following minimal conception of *a priori* justification:

APJ. *S*'s belief that *p* is justified *a priori* if and only if *S*'s belief that *p* is non-experientially justified.³

A number of theorists reject (APJ) on the ground that the concept of *a priori*

¹ J. Thurow, 'Experientially Defeasible *A Priori* Justification', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 56 (2006), pp. 596–602.

² Thurow, p. 596. He also offers a brief defence of premise (1) in §1.

³ A. Casullo, *A Priori Justification* (Oxford UP, 2003), ch. 2.

justification contains an indefeasibility condition. Hilary Putnam favours the strong condition

SC. S 's justified belief that p is not defeasible by *any* evidence.⁴

Philip Kitcher endorses the weaker condition

WC. S 's justified belief that p is not defeasible by any *experiential* evidence.⁵

I argue against both conditions, offering an independent argument against each.

Aron Edidin, however, maintains that (WC) entails (SC) and that as a consequence it is not necessary to offer an independent argument against (WC).⁶ His strategy is to argue that

S. S 's justified belief that p is defeasible by *non-experiential* evidence

entails

W. S 's justified belief that p is defeasible by *experiential* evidence.

If (S) entails (W), then not-(W) entails not-(S). Therefore if S 's justified belief that p is not defeasible by *experiential* evidence, then it is not defeasible by *any* evidence. Here is Thurow's version (p. 598) of Edidin's argument:

Suppose I am defeasibly *a priori* justified in believing p , but S , whom I take to be more competent than myself and who is familiar with my justification for p , claims to see clearly – non-experientially, by intuition, say – that my justification is defeated: either it is flawed or there is sufficient countervailing evidence. As long as I am convinced that S is sufficiently reliable, it seems that this testimony defeats my justification for p .

The central claim is that if non-experiential defeating evidence is possible for S 's justified belief that p , then *testimonial* defeating evidence for that belief is also possible, namely, the testimony of a reliable authority who claims to possess the relevant non-experiential defeating evidence.

My objection (*A Priori Justification*, pp. 69–71) to this argument is that it is not developed in sufficient detail to support its conclusion. Three key pieces of information are missing:

R1. The degree to which my non-experiential evidence justifies belief in p

R2. The degree to which a belief that q must be justified in order to defeat a justified belief that p

R3. The degree to which testimony justifies my belief that q .⁷

In support of this contention, I argue that there are ways of articulating (R1)–(R3) such that (S) entails not-(W). Thurow (pp. 598–9) neatly encapsulates the core of my argument:

⁴ H. Putnam, '“Two Dogmas” Revisited', repr. in his *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. III (Cambridge UP, 1983), pp. 87–97, at p. 90.

⁵ P. Kitcher, *The Nature of Mathematical Knowledge* (Oxford UP, 1983), p. 24.

⁶ A. Edidin, 'A Priori Knowledge for Fallibilists', *Philosophical Studies*, 46 (1984), pp. 189–97.

⁷ Thurow, p. 598. For ease of exposition, I use Thurow's formulation of my objection.

Casullo argues that there are ways to fill in these three details in which a non-experientially defeasible belief is not experientially defeasible by testimony; hence Edidin's argument for (2) fails. Without further argument, we have no reason to believe (2). Casullo fills in the three details as follows: suppose that

- A1. My belief that p is justified to the degree of *certainly* (i.e., the highest possible degree of justification)
- A2. One's justified belief that q defeats a justified belief that p if and only if one's degree of justification for q equals or exceeds one's justification for believing that p (and q , if true, is a reason to doubt that p)
- A3. The degree of justification for a proposition is diminished when it is transferred by a fallible source.

Given (A1)–(A3), my defeasible non-experiential justification for p is not, according to Casullo, defeasible by S 's testimony that q , even if S 's justification for believing that q is also certain.

To summarize: I maintain that Edidin's argument fails to show that (S) entails (W) because it is incomplete. It lacks three crucial epistemic premises that are necessary to mediate the transition from (S) to (W).

2. *Thurrow's objection and supporting argument for premise (2)*

Thurrow offers (p. 599) two objections to my assessment of Edidin's argument:

First, to show that (2) is false, it is not sufficient to be able to find a way of filling in (R1)–(R3) for which the entailment in (2) is false. In addition, the way of filling in these details must yield a possible situation.

Thurrow, however, contends that (A2) is false, and concludes that 'If ... (A2) is false, and hence not possible (given that it is either necessarily true or necessarily false), Casullo's argument fails'.

This objection misrepresents the goal of my argument. My contention is not that (2) is false. It is that Edidin's argument *fails to establish* that (S), the antecedent of (2), entails (W), the consequent of (2). (In his summary of my argument (*ibid.*), Thurrow correctly reports my conclusion 'Without further argument, we have no reason to believe (2)'.) This contention is compatible with the truth of (2), and also with the truth of Edidin's claim that (S) entails (W). Failure to provide a compelling argument for a particular conclusion does not entail that the conclusion is false. The point of introducing (A1)–(A3) is not to maintain that it is the correct way, or the only way, of filling in (R1)–(R3), but to show that not every way of filling in (R1)–(R3) supports the claim that (S) entails (W). So it is incumbent on any defender of this claim to provide a way of filling in (R1)–(R3) which supports it.

Thurrow offers a second, more challenging objection to my assessment. He concedes that any argument that purports to show that (S) entails (W) must provide some way of filling in (R1)–(R3). He also concedes that if (R1)–(R3) are filled in by (A1)–(A3), Edidin's argument fails. Nevertheless, he contends (pp. 599–600) that a modified version of Edidin's argument succeeds:

Even granting his three ways of filling in the details of the case, my non-experiential justification is defeasible by experience. This is why. Given (A1)–(A3), Casullo is surely right that my friend’s testimony that q is insufficient on its own to defeat my non-experiential evidence for p . But what if I had three, five or ten trusted friends who testified that q ? Multiple corroborating testimonies surely increase my reason to believe that q . With enough testimony, it seems clear that my non-experiential justification for p can be defeated.

The leading idea of the modified argument is that although the testimony of an individual cognizer cannot always justify a potential defeater q to whatever degree is necessary to defeat someone’s non-experiential justification for the belief that p , multiple corroborating testimonies (hereafter ‘MCT’) can do so.

Thurow defends his leading idea by offering an example. Suppose that I assert that there is a bug on the wall, on the basis of seeming to see clearly that there is a bug crawling up the wall. My belief is justified by this perceptual experience. Now suppose that a trusted friend who hears my assertion were to respond that he does not see a bug on the wall. According to Thurow, my belief remains justified despite the testimonial evidence to the contrary. However, if several trusted friends were all to respond that they do not see a bug on the wall, my justification would be defeated. He then (p. 600) generalizes:

If multiple testimony can defeat perceptual justification, it seems clear that it can also defeat non-experiential justification. The two cases seem relevantly indistinguishable.... The more the testimony in favour of q , the more reason to believe that q . Eventually you have so much reason to believe that q that your justification for p is defeated. What kind of justification you have for p is irrelevant.

I propose to grant Thurow’s claims about the bug example and focus on his generalization. My primary contention is that it contains a significant *lacuna*.

Thurow maintains that if MCT can defeat perceptual justification, it can defeat non-experiential justification. The type of justification in question is irrelevant. Here I agree entirely with Thurow. What is relevant to whether one’s justified belief that q can defeat one’s justified belief that p is the *degree of justification* which each belief enjoys. More specifically, since Thurow endorses (A2), one’s justified belief that q defeats one’s justified belief that p if and only if one’s justification for q equals or exceeds one’s justification for p . The type of justification one has for p or q is irrelevant. Therefore the proper conclusion to draw on the basis of Thurow’s example is that if MCT can defeat one’s perceptually justified beliefs, then MCT can defeat one’s non-experientially justified beliefs which are *justified to a degree less than or equal to* one’s perceptually justified beliefs.

Thurow’s main goal, however, is to establish the more general conclusion that *all* non-experientially justified beliefs which are defeasible by non-experiential evidence are also defeasible by MCT. Since he endorses (A1), he allows that some non-experientially justified beliefs are defeasibly justified to the degree of certainty – the highest possible degree of justification. Consequently, given (A2), his example establishes the more general conclusion that all non-experientially justified beliefs

which are defeasible by non-experiential evidence are also defeasible by MCT *only if* the belief that there is a bug on the wall is justified to the degree of certainty. Thurow has not argued for this contention. Moreover, it is not plausible. It is generally agreed that beliefs about the character of one's perceptual experiences, such as the belief that I seem to see clearly that there is a bug crawling up the wall, are justified to a higher degree than the beliefs about physical objects which they justify. But if that is true, then the latter beliefs are not justified to the degree of certainty. So Thurow has two options here. The first is (a) to argue that perceptually justified beliefs about the character of one's perceptual experiences are justified to the degree of certainty; (b) to argue that their justification is defeasible by MCT; and (c) to extend this result to the case of non-experientially justified beliefs. The second option is to argue directly that all non-experientially justified beliefs which are defeasible by non-experiential evidence are also defeasible by MCT. Neither option appears promising.

Returning to Thurow's example, assume that my belief that I seem to see clearly that there is a bug crawling up the wall is justified to the degree of certainty. What sort of additional testimony given by my friends would defeat my justification? What could they tell me? They might tell me again that they do not see a bug on the wall. But this would not do. They might tell me that they do not seem to see clearly that there is a bug crawling up the wall. This would not do either. They might tell me that I am the victim of a rogue scientific experiment in which people are induced to form false beliefs about the character of their perceptual experiences. This would not do either. I would conclude that the experiment had failed, since I do seem to see clearly that there is a bug crawling up the wall. So it is not at all obvious that perceptually justified beliefs about the character of one's perceptual experiences are defeasible by MCT. Moreover, to show that such justified beliefs are defeasible by MCT, Thurow must address some difficult questions regarding privileged access to the character of one's perceptual experiences. Since he does not address those questions, there is a *lacuna* in his argument.

Thurow can avoid this problem by exercising the second option and arguing directly that all non-experientially justified beliefs which are defeasible by non-experiential evidence are also defeasible by MCT. Since he endorses (A₁)–(A₃), this approach succeeds only if

- C. MCT can justify beliefs to the degree of certainty – the highest possible degree of justification.

Thurow, however, does not defend (C). The closest he comes to doing so is asserting (p. 600) 'The more the testimony in favour of q , the more reason to believe that q '. This contention is weaker than (C), and moreover is unsupported. Hence there is again a *lacuna* in Thurow's argument.

I conclude by offering two examples that call (C) into question. Many people have told me that Cantor's continuum hypothesis cannot be proved or disproved from the axioms of set theory. Moreover, I have also read the same claim in many reputable textbooks and journal articles. I have never attempted to work through the proof for this claim, and would fail miserably if I tried. Is my belief that this

claim is true justified *to the same degree* as it is for those who follow the proof? The answer, in my opinion, is clearly negative. Moreover, it remains negative even if I continue to hear from as many trusted colleagues as you like that this claim is true. We (epistemically) value the proof itself because it provides a higher degree of justification than the testimony that there is such a proof.

Suppose that Frege has just published the first volume of his *Grundgesetze* and is non-experientially justified to the highest degree in believing each of his axioms, including the notorious fifth axiom, on the basis of their self-evidence (whatever that comes to). Suppose he now receives a letter from Russell merely stating that he (Russell) has derived a contradiction from the fifth axiom. Finally, assume that Frege is familiar with Russell's reputation and work. Is his justification for believing the fifth axiom defeated? Presumably not, since it involves the testimony of only a single cognizer, a point which Thurow concedes. But now suppose that trusted colleagues begin telling Frege that they have seen the proof and that it appears sound to them. We can assume that he hears this from as many trusted colleagues as you like. Is Frege's justification defeated? In my view, it is not. Given the self-evidence of the axiom, he has good reason to doubt the testimony of his colleagues; perhaps they overlooked a subtle flaw in the proof. His belief remains justified until he examines the proof for himself. To deny this is to be committed to the implausible view that Frege is *no more justified* in believing that the fifth axiom is false after he examines the proof for himself than he was before examining it.

In the final analysis, both Edidin's argument and Thurow's argument in support of the claim that (S) entails (W) suffer from a common defect: both involve an unsubstantiated assumption about the degree to which testimony can justify a belief. Edidin's assumption is

EA. The testimony of an individual can justify a belief that *q* to whatever degree is necessary to defeat a non-experientially justified belief that *p*.

Thurow's assumption is a variant of (EA):

TA. MCT can justify a belief that *q* to whatever degree is necessary to defeat a non-experientially justified belief that *p*.

I do not claim to have shown that these assumptions are false; I only claim that Edidin and Thurow have not shown that either is true. They have simply helped themselves to the key epistemological claim of their respective arguments. The moral of the story is that any attempt to show that either assumption is true or that either assumption is false must explicitly address the epistemological issues in (R1)–(R3).

3. *Thurow's supporting argument for the contrapositive of premise (2)*

Thurow's goal in §3 is to respond to a potential objection to his defence of (2): that it commits him to the view that all *a priori* justified beliefs are defeasible by experience. To blunt this objection, he offers (p. 600) three examples of propositions that 'seem so clear and obvious that I find it hard to believe that any amount of testimony against them would undermine my justification for believing them':

KM. All bachelors are men

KT. If one knows that p , then p is true

KD. If X killed Y , then Y died.

In defence of his contention, Thurow maintains 'If I encountered a group of trustworthy people who testified that these were false, the most I could justifiably conclude would be that these people associate a different concept with "bachelor", "killed" or "know"'.⁸

He faces a new challenge at this juncture. Suppose, for example, that his non-experientially justified belief (KT) were defeasible by non-experiential evidence. It would constitute a counter-example to (2), since it would be a non-experientially justified belief defeasible by non-experiential evidence but not by experiential evidence. To circumvent this problem, Thurow must show that 'all cases of belief which are plausibly experientially indefeasible are also non-experientially indefeasible' (pp. 600–1). He must defend the contrapositive of (2):

2*. If a belief is indefeasible by experiential evidence, then it is indefeasible by non-experiential evidence.

Thurow's strategy for defending (2*) is (p. 601) 'to find a generalizable case in which the antecedent is true, and show of it that the consequent is also true'.

The argument proceeds in five steps.⁸ The first maintains that (KT) is non-experientially justified to a very high degree: '(KT) seems overwhelmingly obvious to me ... I have a very strong intuition that this is true'. The second purports to identify what would be the best case of non-experiential defeating evidence for one's justified belief that (KT), if it were non-experientially defeasible: 'a counter-example would do ... a scenario in which it seems to me that it is true to say that S knows that p while p is false'. The third alleges that the non-experiential evidence in question would *not* defeat one's original justification for believing (KT): 'I might at most be justified in believing that I really have two concepts associated with the term "knows": my original strong intuition concerns one concept, and my intuition about the alleged counter-example concerns the other'. The fourth step draws the conclusion that one's justification for believing (KT) is not defeasible by non-experiential evidence: 'Since offering a counter-example is the best way (i.e., the way which would most surely provide a defeater if any way could) in which (KT) could be defeated non-experientially, I conclude that my justification for (KT) is not non-experientially defeasible'. The final step is the generalization from this single case to (2*): 'This conclusion seems generalizable to any beliefs which are supported by an intuition as strong as that supporting (KT); these are the only candidate cases of experientially indefeasible beliefs' (p. 601).

Thurow's defence of (2*) involves a significant oversight. To reveal this oversight, I propose to grant the first four steps of his argument, which address (KT) exclusively, and to focus on the final step, which generalizes his result.⁹ The generalization

⁸ Thanks to a referee for urging me to address this argument.

⁹ I do not agree with his treatment of this case, but a full discussion of it would require addressing some difficult semantic issues.

rests on the following critical assumption: for any belief which is non-experientially justified by a strong intuition, if that belief were defeasible by non-experiential evidence, then the best case for such defeating evidence, the one that would most surely provide a defeater if there were one, is a counter-example: more concretely, in cases where intuition justifies a belief that if something is F then it is G, the best case for defeating evidence is a competing intuition to the effect that some particular x which is F is not G. The example which I offered in §2 involving Frege's fifth axiom shows that this assumption is mistaken, and it undermines Thurow's generalization.

Frege had the strong intuition that his fifth axiom was true, which justified non-experientially to a high degree his belief that the axiom was true. Moreover, as I argued in §2, Frege's non-experiential justification for that belief was not defeasible by MCT. It was, however, defeated by non-experiential evidence, i.e., by his examination of Russell's proof. It was not defeated by a counter-example (in Thurow's sense of that term), i.e., a strong intuition to the effect that this particular concept C is such that there is no set consisting of all and only those objects satisfying C. Moreover, even for those familiar with Russell's proof, there remains the strong intuition that Frege's fifth axiom is true, and there is no competing intuition to the contrary.

The example shows that there is an alternative type of non-experiential defeater for beliefs non-experientially justified on the basis of a strong intuition: a demonstration that the proposition justified by the strong intuition, in conjunction with other propositions which one is non-experientially justified in believing, entails some proposition which one is non-experientially justified in believing is false (a contradiction, in the case of Frege's fifth axiom). The example also shows that the best case for non-experiential defeating evidence for beliefs non-experientially justified by a strong intuition, the one most likely to provide such a defeater if there is one, is not always a counter-example. Consequently the critical assumption of Thurow's generalization is false, and his defence of (2*) fails.

Thurow's defence of (2*) ultimately fails for the same reason as his defence of (2). The Frege example provides a case of a belief which is non-experientially justified to a high degree by a strong intuition, but which is also non-experientially defeasible. Consequently, in order to defend either (2) or (2*), Thurow must show that Frege's non-experientially justified belief is defeasible by experience. To do so, he must support his key assumption:

TA. MCT can justify a belief that q to whatever degree is necessary to defeat a non-experientially justified belief that p .

Since Thurow does not provide support for this, his defences both of (2) and of (2*) fail. The moral of the story is again that any attempt to show that this assumption is true (or false) must explicitly address the epistemological issues in (R1)–(R3).¹⁰

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¹⁰ Thanks to John Gibbons for his comments on an earlier version.