

Basing on Absences

The beliefs of a *rational* animal hence would seem never to issue from *unaided* introspection, memory, or perception.

For reason is always at least a silent partner on the watch for other relevant data, a silent partner whose very *silence* is a contributing cause of the belief outcome.

Sosa (1991)

1. Introduction

You go for a stroll in the forest with Amy and Bob. You find a mushroom. Amy tells you that the mushroom is edible. Amy is an expert mycologist, so you believe that the mushroom is edible. Amy's testimony gave you *propositional* justification for believing that the mushroom is edible. That is to say: the evidence you have after hearing Amy's testimony sufficiently supports the proposition that the mushroom is edible. Moreover, because you believed the proposition on the basis of Amy's testimony, your belief is *doxastically* justified: not only do you have evidence that sufficiently supports the proposition that the mushroom is edible, but you believe that proposition on the basis of the evidence in your possession which supports it.¹ What does this basing relation consist in? According to causalists about the basing relation, it must be a causal relation. In order to be doxastically justified in believing that the mushroom is edible, your belief must be caused (in part) by Amy's testimony. Causalism about the basing relation is not the only game in town, and we will consider alternatives later on, but for now let us proceed on the assumption that causalism is true.

What would have happened if Bob, who is an even better mycologist than Amy, had told you that the mushroom is not edible? Then you would have lost both propositional and doxastic justification for believing that the mushroom is edible. This is what epistemologists mean when they say that justification is *defeasible*: a belief can be justified on the basis of some evidence E and not be justified on the basis of some other evidence E' even when E is a proper subset of E'. If you are rational, then if Bob had told you that the mushroom is not edible you would not

¹ That is the traditional way of understanding the relation between doxastic and propositional justification, but some authors (usually those with externalist leanings) propose to reverse the direction of dependence, arguing that doxastic justification is primary and that propositional justification can be defined in its terms. In this paper we assume that the traditional view on the relation between propositional and doxastic justification is the right one, but the issues we address should be translatable to the alternative view. We also assume a broadly evidentialist view according to which what you are justified in believing supervenes on what evidence you have at the time, but this is just for convenience of exposition, and our arguments could also be translated to a view according to which there can be justification without evidence.

have believed that it was edible. If this is the case, we will say that you are *counterfactually sensitive* to the existence of defeaters. But suppose that you are not counterfactually sensitive to the existence of defeaters—in particular, because of your animosity towards Bob, you would irrationally discount his testimony were he to offer it. As it happens, though, Bob does not offer his testimony, because he agrees with Amy that the mushroom is edible. So, you believe that the mushroom is edible on the basis of evidence which justifies this belief (Amy’s testimony) and you do not have evidence to the contrary. Isn’t that enough for you to be justified in believing that the mushroom is edible?

The quote from Ernest Sosa that serves as epigraph to this paper suggests that the answer must be “No.” More carefully, the quote suggests that doxastic justification for believing a certain proposition requires not just basing the belief on evidence one has that is sufficient to propositionally justify the belief, but also being sensitive to the *lack* of sufficiently weighty defeaters.² A rational subject has not only the capacity to detect evidence for the proposition in question, but also the capacity to detect the lack of defeaters for that evidence. In picturesque terms, we can postulate the existence of a monitoring mechanism whose function is to report the existence of defeaters.³

A rational subject, then, bases her beliefs not just on the evidence that supports it, but also on the silence of this monitoring mechanism. Having a belief to the effect that there are no defeaters present is neither necessary nor sufficient for the correct functioning of the monitoring mechanism. That belief is not sufficient for the correct functioning of the monitoring mechanism because it can be had even if that mechanism is absent or not functioning correctly. And, as we will further argue below, the correct functioning of that mechanism need not take the form of an explicit belief like that, and therefore such a belief is not necessary for that correct functioning. Similarly, while being counterfactually sensitive to the existence of defeaters is a good indication that this monitoring mechanism is working properly, we shall see that this kind of counterfactual dependence is neither necessary nor sufficient for the correct functioning of the monitoring mechanism either. Nevertheless, in our story above, not only are you not counterfactually sensitive to Bob’s testimony; in addition, and more importantly, because of your animosity towards Bob you do not have a properly functioning mechanism for detecting that specific kind of defeater. Therefore, even when you base your belief that the mushroom is edible on the expert testimony of Amy, your belief is not doxastically justified, because it is not based on the silence of a properly functioning monitoring mechanism.

In what follows we develop this idea in more detail, as it applies to the different categories to be introduced shortly (defeaters of three different kinds and disqualifiers). We argue that causal theories of basing have the right kinds of resources to incorporate that idea and the role played

² Sosa (1964) had already pushed a similar line: “A striking fact is brought to light by this part of the analysis: besides justification for ‘believing that. . .’ or for ‘believing that not. . .’ justification for ‘not believing that. . .’ is also involved in the concept of knowledge.”

³ When it comes to the reasons-sensitivity involved in action, Sartorio (2023: 55) discusses “sensors” that correspond to rational dispositions of agents.

by defeaters and disqualifiers in the concept of doxastic justification. Our argument here will borrow from action theory in that it will be inspired by similar arguments on behalf of causalist accounts of action and freedom. We end with a discussion of the bearing of our view on Pryor's dogmatism.

2. Defeaters

"Defeater" is said in many ways in the contemporary epistemological literature. A distinction that will be crucial for us in what follows is the one between knowledge and justification defeaters.⁴ Knowledge defeaters are an offshoot of the Gettier problem, and even their very existence is controversial. In a traditional Gettier case, the subject believes a false proposition p and on that basis believes a true proposition q —and it's this belief in q that is a justified true belief which nevertheless does not amount to knowledge. In those kinds of cases, if the subject were to (justifiedly) believe that $\text{not-}p$, she would no longer have justification for believing that q . $\text{Not-}p$, then, is a knowledge defeater for the subject's knowledge that q . In general, a true proposition P is a knowledge defeater for a subject's S 's belief that Q just in case S would no longer be justified in believing Q if S were to believe P .⁵

We mention knowledge defeaters only to set them aside. What we are interested in are justification defeaters. Whereas the existence of knowledge defeaters is controversial, virtually everybody accepts the existence of justification defeaters. Indeed, the existence of justification defeaters is guaranteed by the defeasible nature of justification. To say that justification is defeasible is to say that there are justification defeaters. Recall our characterization of the defeasibility of justification: a belief can be justified on the basis of some evidence E and not be justified on the basis of some other evidence E' even when E is a proper subset of E' . If this is accepted, then some member of E' will make the difference between the subject's being justified and her not being justified: that member is a defeater for the subject's justification. In our example, Bob's testimony (if it exists) is a defeater for your justification for believing that the mushroom is edible.

But we are not done with classifications, because there are different kinds of justification defeaters. One canonical distinction was made by John Pollock (1986), and it is the distinction between rebutting and undercutting defeaters. A rebutting defeater for S 's belief that p is a proposition q which is a reason for believing $\text{not-}p$. Our example of Bob's saying that the mushroom is not edible is a rebutting defeater for Amy's testimony. An undercutting defeater for S 's belief that p is a proposition q which is a reason to believe that S 's grounds for believing that p do not really justify belief in p . Thinking of inferential justification on the model of an

⁴ The terminology is not great, because both kinds of defeaters affect justification. However, an alternative terminology of "propositional" vs. "doxastic" defeaters is not great either because neither kind of defeater needs to be believed to do its defeating work.

⁵ This counterfactual definition of knowledge defeaters is problematic for reasons related to why a counterfactual sensitivity account of sensitivity to absences fails, as explained below, but we need not slow down to figure out how exactly to define knowledge defeaters.

argument, Pollock said that whereas rebutting defeaters are reasons that attack the conclusion, undercutting defeaters attack the connection between the premises and the conclusion. For instance, if Bob had said (falsely but believably) that Amy is not a good mycologist, that would have constituted an undercutting defeater for Amy's testimony.

But this characterization of undercutting defeaters is not sufficiently fine-grained, because it conflates two very different kinds of defeaters. One way for a proposition to attack the connection between premises and the conclusion is for it to entail information in the light of which the premises no longer provide sufficient justification for believing the conclusion. This is what Pollock clearly had in mind when talking of undercutting defeaters. But another way for a proposition to attack the connection between the premises and the conclusion is to entail that the premises were never a good reason for believing the conclusion to begin with. If, for instance, I were to become justified in believing that testimony never justifies, then I would lose my justification for believing that the mushroom is edible on the basis of Amy's testimony, but that would be different from a case where Bob tells me that Amy is not a good mycologist.

All of those justification defeaters we will call "endogenous defeaters". They leave the initial evidence E untouched, and in some way defeat E's power to justify the original belief (by adding to E if they are rebutting defeaters, and by undermining E's relevance to the original belief if they are undercutting defeaters). But there are also defeaters that call into question E itself—that is to say, defeaters that make it the case that E is no longer part of your evidence. Suppose, for instance, that what Bob says is not that the mushroom is not edible, but rather that you misheard Amy. Bob's testimony is neither a rebutting nor an undercutting defeater for Amy's testimony as evidence that the mushroom is edible. Rather, Bob's testimony (when credible) makes you lose Amy's testimony as evidence that the mushroom is edible. We will call defeaters that do this "exogenous defeaters."⁶

There is a different way of gaining new evidence that does not defeat one's justification, but that changes how beliefs should be based to retain doxastic justification. Suppose that Amy first says that Bob said that the mushroom is edible. Amy is a reliable reporter of Bob's testimony, and so on her say-so you are justified in believing that Bob said that the mushroom is edible, and thus justified in believing that the mushroom is edible. But Bob, overhearing Amy, then says: "That's right, that mushroom is edible." You are still justified in believing that the mushroom is edible, but if you still base your belief on Amy's testimony you are missing out on a better basis: Bob's own testimony. This is what Muñoz (2019) calls "disqualifiers."

Summing up: there are two kinds of endogenous defeaters, rebutting and undercutting defeaters. There are also disqualifiers. Both endogenous defeaters and disqualifiers work additively: they add to the evidence you already have, and have the ability to change whether you are propositionally and doxastically justified (in the case of endogenous defeaters) or just whether you are doxastically justified (in the case of disqualifiers). There are also exogenous defeaters, which work subtractively: they remove some propositions from your evidence. Exogenous defeaters are just like endogenous defeaters in that they have the ability to change

⁶ See Christensen (1992), Weisberg (2009, 2015), Comesaña (2020a, 2020b).

both your propositional and your doxastic justificatory status. Everyone agrees that defeaters and disqualifiers must be taken into account when they are part of your evidence. The question we'll examine in this paper is whether we must also be properly sensitive to their *absence*, when they are absent from our evidence.

3. The total evidence requirement

We said above that in order to be doxastically justified in believing that the mushroom is edible it is not enough for you to have evidence that the mushroom is edible—you must, in addition, base your belief on the evidence you have. But we must be more careful. For you may have evidence that the mushroom is edible (for instance, Amy's testimony) which, by itself, would justify you in believing that proposition, but also have additional evidence (for instance, Bob's counter-testimony) which, even together with the original one, does not justify you in believing it. Rather, what must happen for you to have propositional justification for believing a proposition is that your *total* evidence on balance supports believing it. There is, thus, a total evidence requirement on propositional justification.

But there is also a total evidence requirement on doxastic justification. Doxastic justification cannot just require that you base your belief on some evidence which gives you propositional justification, for part of your evidence might give you that justification while your total evidence on balance does not. If you have both Amy's testimony and Bob's counter-evidence and believe that the mushroom is edible based on Amy's testimony while ignoring Bob's, you are not doxastically justified.⁷

This idea that doxastic as well as propositional justification must meet a total evidence requirement can be captured in different ways. Conee and Feldman (1985), for instance, give the following definition of well-founded belief ("well-founded" is their term for "doxastic justification"):

Well-founded

S's doxastic attitude *D* at *t* toward proposition *p* is well-founded if and only if:

- (i) having *D* toward *p* is [propositionally] justified for *S* at *t*;
and
- (ii) *S* has *D* towards *p* on the basis of some body of evidence *e*, such that:
 - (a) *S* has *e* as evidence at *t*;
 - (b) having *D* towards *p* fits *e*; and
 - (c) there is no more inclusive body of evidence *e'* had by *S* at *t* such that having *D* towards *p* does not fit *e'*.

⁷ If, as we are assuming, doxastic justification presupposes propositional justification, then it follows from the fact that in that case you lack propositional justification that you lack doxastic justification as well—but this mere implication doesn't explain *why* you lack doxastic justification: because you are ignoring relevant evidence.

Conee and Feldman define propositional justification in terms of the overtly epistemic primitive notion of some evidence *fitting* a proposition, and then define doxastic justification as above. Of particular importance to us is the final clause, for it is a kind of total evidence clause. Notice how that definition deals with the kind of case we just discussed, where you base your belief that the mushroom is edible on Amy's testimony while ignoring Bob's counter-testimony. In that case, you fail clause (c) of the definition, but your failure to be doxastically justified is overdetermined because you also fail clause (i)—i.e., you are not even propositionally justified in believing as you do. Rather, what the final clause is designed to do is deal with cases where you are propositionally justified because your evidence contains so-called “defeaters defeaters.” One simple case of that kind could go as follows:

Defeater-defeater

Amy's testimony: That mushroom is edible.

Bob's first testimony: No, that mushroom is not edible.

Bob's second testimony: Sorry, I take that back: that mushroom is indeed edible.

Suppose that, in that case, you believe that the mushroom is edible, while ignoring both Bob's first and second testimony. In that case, you satisfy clause (i) of the definition of well-foundedness, because you are indeed propositionally justified. But you fail to satisfy clause (c). You do not satisfy clause (c) because you base your belief on Amy's testimony alone, whereas there is a more inclusive body of evidence, to wit, Amy's testimony together with Bob's first testimony, that does not fit believing that the mushroom is edible. In order to satisfy clause (c), you must base your belief on all three bits of evidence.

So the evidentialist definition of well-foundedness has ways to capture the total evidence requirement. But it does not capture all aspects of the requirement. For satisfying the total evidence requirement involves being sensitive to what is *not* part of your evidence as well as to what is. To see this, return to the case where you have Amy's testimony alone—Bob is silent—and you believe that the mushroom is edible on that basis. The definition of well-foundedness entails that your belief is doxastically as well as propositionally justified. But from the facts that your only relevant evidence is Amy's testimony and that you based your belief on that testimony it doesn't follow that you are doxastically justified. For suppose that even though you know that Bob is a better mycologist than Amy, you irrationally distrust him, and as a result you would not have believed him had he said that the mushroom is not edible. In that case, you are not being properly sensitive to a feature of your total evidence that is crucial in explaining why it propositionally justifies you in believing that the mushroom is edible: namely, that *it does not contain* Bob's testimony to the contrary. This feature of your total evidence does not consist in its containing this or that bit of information. Rather, it consists in its *not* containing a certain bit of information. What your total evidence lacks is just as relevant to what it justifies you in believing as what it contains.

Indeed, to call a body of evidence your “total” evidence already involves a commitment to what is absent from that body of evidence. For to say that $E_1, \dots, E_n$ is your total evidence is to say that your evidence contains E_1 through E_n *and nothing more*. Thus, to say that your total

(relevant) evidence consists of Amy's testimony is to say that it doesn't contain any other (relevant) information, and thus, in particular, that it doesn't contain Bob's counter-testimony. That your evidence does not contain Bob's counter-testimony is thus a crucial feature of your total evidence, a feature which explains why you are justified in believing that the mushroom is edible. Because the absence of Bob's counter-testimony is a crucial feature of your total evidence which explains why you are justified in believing that the mushroom is edible, in order to be doxastically justified in believing that proposition you must not only base your belief on your evidence, but you must also be properly sensitive to the fact that your *total* evidence propositionally justifies you in so believing. Part of this sensitivity is the sensitivity to the absence of Bob's testimony. Thus, to be doxastically justified in believing that the mushroom is edible, you must be properly sensitive to the fact that Bob did not testify to the contrary.

Consider the following cases, where a different kind of defeater is absent in each:

1. **Absence of a rebutting defeater.** Bob does not say that the mushroom is not edible.
2. **Absence of an undercutting defeater.** Bob does not say that Amy is not a good mycologist.
3. **Absence of exogenous defeater.** Bob does not say that you misheard Amy.

Let us first notice that those need not be different cases (indeed, when Bob agrees with Amy and doesn't say anything, all three kinds of defeaters are absent), but it is useful to consider them separately for analytical purposes. For each of them, we can consider a "good" case, where you are sensitive to the absence of the relevant defeater, and a "bad" case, where you are not. In the good case, your belief is based both on Amy's testimony and on the absence of Bob's defeating testimony, and is therefore doxastically justified. In the bad case, your belief is not based on the absence of Bob's testimony, and is therefore not doxastically justified. You could be sensitive to one kind of defeater but not another, of course.

The treatment of disqualifiers is more delicate, and we delay it to later. As far as defeaters are concerned, though, we have argued that in order to be doxastically justified your belief needs to be properly sensitive to their absence.

4. Sensitivity to absences

Before deciding whether you accept our conclusion that in order to be doxastically justified you need to be properly sensitive to the absence of defeaters, you should ask the following question: what does it mean for you to be properly sensitive to the absence of a defeater? We first examine two natural but incorrect answers to this question, and then argue for a third one.

A first natural answer to the question of what it takes for you to be properly sensitive to absences in your total evidence is that you must have a belief whose content reflects that absence:

Doxastic sensitivity view

A subject *S* is properly sensitive to the absence of factor *f* in *S*'s total evidence if and only if *S* believes that *S*'s total evidence lacks *f*.

According to the doxastic sensitivity account, for instance, you are properly sensitive to the absence of Bob's testimony in case 1 if and only if you believe that Bob didn't say that the mushroom was not edible.

There are a few related and serious problems for the doxastic sensitivity view. The first one is that it has wide skeptical consequences. For we do not ordinarily form beliefs to the effect that such-and-such a defeater is absent, and if proper sensitivity to the absence of defeaters is necessary for doxastic justification, then we are not generally doxastically justified. But the very fact that we do not ordinarily form those beliefs, together with the fact that we do not thereby deem ourselves to lack doxastic justification, militates against the doxastic sensitivity view. Another angle on the same problem is that the doxastic sensitivity view is too intellectualistic: forming beliefs about something is not the only or best way to be sensitive to its presence or absence. These problems are all the more serious in light of the fact that there are an indefinite number of absences that we need to be sensitive to. For Bob's testimony is not the only possible defeater. Caroline, Daniel, Eve, Fred, ... (all very serious mycologists) could have testified that the mushroom is not edible. Moreover, their testimony could have taken a variety of different forms. For instance, Bob could have said, not that the mushroom is not edible, but that he is pretty confident that the mushroom is not edible. Or it could have been an undercutting rather than a rebutting defeater. Or an exogenous defeater. As there are an indefinite number of possible bits of evidence that would have made us not doxastically justified, there are a correspondingly indefinite number of absences that we need to be properly sensitive to in order to be doxastically justified—and that, according to the doxastic sensitivity view, would have to be reflected in our having certain beliefs. So much the worse for the doxastic sensitivity view.⁸

A second natural account of what it takes to be sensitive to absences does much better with respect to these problems. According to this second account, all it takes to be properly sensitive to the absence of a feature from one's evidence is for a certain counterfactual to obtain:

Counterfactual sensitivity view

A subject *S* is properly sensitive to the absence of factor *f* in *S*'s total evidence if and only if, if *f* were present in *S*'s total evidence, *S* would believe so.

The counterfactual sensitivity view is not too intellectualized, and it is not incompatible with our actual practice of not forming beliefs to the effect that such-and-such a defeater is absent

⁸ As we will see later, our view doesn't have this problem because it doesn't require our having beliefs that reflect our sensitivity (it only requires the sensitivity itself).

from our evidence. Moreover, counterfactual sensitivity to absences is easy to come by, and thus the fact that we need to be sensitive to an indefinite number of such absences is not a problem for the view. For, on this view, to be sensitive to the absence of testimony from Bob, Daniel, Eve, Fred, etc., just is for it to be the case that, had each of those testimonies been present, you would have had the corresponding belief. It is not hard for an indefinite number of such counterfactuals to be true of us.

The counterfactual sensitivity view thus fares much better than the doxastic sensitivity view. But it still fails, in both directions. The failure in the left-to-right direction is familiar from Frankfurt-style cases in action theory (Frankfurt 1969). Suppose that you raised your arm to ask a question. Some philosophers think that in order for the raising of your arm to be free you must have been able to refrain from raising your arm. And indeed in normal circumstances you could have so refrained. But the circumstances are not normal: an evil neuroscientist who is intent on your raising your arm has implanted a device in your brain that, when activated, makes you raise your arm. As it happens, you did want to raise your arm, so the neuroscientist didn't need to activate the device—but, had you not raised your arm by a certain time, he would have activated it. Thus, it is not the case that you could have refrained from raising your arm. Nevertheless, many philosophers have been convinced by Frankfurt that you still raised your arm freely. To return to our topic, suppose that you are a normal rational human, and thus believe that the mushroom is edible on the basis of Amy's testimony. Moreover, in normal circumstances, had Bob said that the mushroom is not edible, you would have followed his testimony and not believed that the mushroom is edible. But circumstances are not normal: an evil neuroscientist who has it in for Bob has implanted a device in your brain that, when activated, makes you dismiss Bob's testimony. As it happens, Bob didn't testify, so the neuroscientist didn't activate the device—but, had Bob testified, he would have activated it. Thus, you are not counterfactually sensitive to the absence of Bob's testimony. Nevertheless, the same pressure there is to say that the agent acted freely in raising his arm in the action case even if you couldn't have refrained from doing it supports the idea that you are properly sensitive to the absence of Bob's testimony even if you would have dismissed it. In both cases, the guiding idea is that everything is fine as far as *actual* goings-on are concerned, and the mere failure of the counterfactual is irrelevant.

The counterfactual sensitivity view also fails in the other direction. For suppose that you irrationally distrust Bob. Thus, under normal circumstances, you would dismiss Bob's testimony were he to offer it. But these are not normal circumstances: a different evil neuroscientist wants Bob to be heard, and so has implanted a device in your brain that, when activated, makes you believe whatever Bob says. As it happens, Bob doesn't testify, so the neuroscientist doesn't activate the device—but, had Bob testified, he would have activated it. Thus, you are counterfactually sensitive to Bob's testimony, but still, as things actually stand you have an irrational distrust of Bob, an irrational distrust which makes you actually insensitive to his testimony, and so you are not justified in your belief.

If neither the doxastic nor the counterfactual sensitivity view are correct, then what *does* it mean for you to be properly sensitive to the absence of defeaters? Even though the counterfactual sensitivity view is false, counterfactual sensitivity is a good guide to *actual*

sensitivity to absences. In the normal case, when no evil neuroscientist is around and you are counterfactually sensitive to Bob's testimony, this counterfactual sensitivity is a symptom of the fact that in the actual case you are being sensitive to the relevant absences. Arguably, this counterfactual sensitivity is grounded in some categorical property of yours: the "causal basis" of your disposition. You can retain this categorical property even if a Frankfurtian neuroscientist disrupts its usual counterfactual manifestation, and it can still be absent even if an anti-Frankfurtian neuroscientist makes it the case that you are counterfactually sensitive.

Earlier we mentioned (metaphorically) a monitoring mechanism. In normal circumstances, this monitoring mechanism alerts you to the presence of defeaters by sounding an alarm (and thereby producing a belief to the effect that a defeater is present), and (as in the Sosa passage) being attuned to the *silence* of this monitoring mechanism is what being properly sensitive to the absence of defeaters amounts to. Taking the consequences of Frankfurt's cases on board means being alive to the possibility that the monitoring mechanism can be in working order (and thus that you can be properly sensitive to its silence) even if it would cease to be in working order (its alarm would not go off) if defeaters were present.

Here is, then, the account we propose:

Actual sensitivity view

A subject *S* is properly sensitive to the absence of factor *f* in *S*'s total evidence if and only if *S* has a certain categorical property in virtue of *S* is actually attuned to the absence of *f*—and it is in virtue of this property that a certain counterfactual pattern is true of *S*: namely, in normal circumstances, if *f* were present in *S*'s total evidence, *S* would believe so.

Our actual sensitivity account is more schematic than either the doxastic or the counterfactual sensitivity accounts in that we contrive no hypotheses about the exact nature of the relevant categorical property (aside from those metaphorical remarks about the silence of a monitoring mechanism). Our account can be seen as positing the actual possession of a disposition (or an intrinsic seat of a disposition, were these to differ) as the basis of the relevant sensitivity to absences, while remaining neutral on the precise nature of that disposition. We regard this as an advantage of the account, especially since the nature of dispositions is a highly debated topic of its own: there is much agreement that dispositions are theoretically useful concepts, but much disagreement about how exactly they should be understood (for discussion, see, e.g., Choi and Fara 2021).

So, our view (applied to case 1, the case of rebutting defeaters) comes down to this. In order to be doxastically justified in believing that the mushroom is edible, your belief must be based not only on Amy's testimony, but also on a proper sensitivity to the absence of Bob's testimony (and indeed, on a proper sensitivity to the absence of any possible defeater). This proper sensitivity need not (and in the normal case will not) take the form of a belief to the effect that such defeaters are absent. Moreover, this proper sensitivity need not (although in the normal case will) be accompanied by a corresponding counterfactual sensitivity to the presence of the

defeater. Instead, it is an actual sensitivity to the absence of the defeater, and it is reflected in the possession of whatever categorical property underlies that counterfactual sensitivity.

But now an important question arises. Even if you are kind enough to agree with us that the notion of proper sensitivity to absences is at least provisionally acceptable—what could it mean for a belief to be *based* on such sensitivity? We turn next to that important question.

5. Basing on absences

There are broadly two theories of basing on the literature: doxastic theories and causal theories. Here is a very rough version of a doxastic theory:⁹

Doxastic basing: *S*'s belief that *p* is based on *e* iff *S* believes that *e* is evidence for *p*.

That formulation is rough partly because it attributes to the subject beliefs about *evidence*, but we mean this just as a placeholder for whatever particular theories of doxastic basing think should be the content of the belief—our misgivings about the doxastic theory are not related to that. Rather, our misgivings about doxastic theories of basing are related to our misgivings about doxastic views of sensitivity to absences. Just as doxastic views of sensitivity to absences must face the fact that we rarely have the requisite beliefs about absences, so too doxastic theories of basing must face the fact that we rarely have the requisite beliefs about basing—and both of them therefore have wide skeptical consequences regarding doxastic justification. One could, of course, argue that the beliefs in question are implicit, or subconscious, or in some other way deflate the notion of belief so that it becomes less jarring to claim that we do have all the requisite beliefs. The success of those maneuvers depends of course on the details of the proposal, but that success is all the more unlikely if we try to account for basing on absences—because, as we have pointed out, there are indefinitely many of those. The notion of belief in question would have to be incredibly thin to encompass these indefinitely many “beliefs.”

The other main theory of the basing relation in the literature (and the received view if there is any in this area) is a causal theory of basing, according to which epistemic basing is to be cashed out in causal terms:

Causal theories of basing: *S*'s belief that *p* is based on *e* iff *S*'s belief that *p* is caused in the right way by *e*.

Of course, if you are with us so far, *e* would have to include absences, such as the absence of Bob's testimony.

Clearly, the causal theory of basing does not have the problem of postulating indefinitely many beliefs. But it seems to have some serious problems of its own, particularly if we are trying to account for basing on absences. The most obvious problem is that causation by omission is a

⁹ See Karcz (2021).

beast that many philosophers think is mythical. One could conclude from this: so much the worse for the claim that we must base our beliefs on absences. We want to argue instead that there are independent reasons for broadening our view of what a causalist view can say while remaining broadly causalist in spirit, and that we can learn some lessons from action theory whose consequences are that a broadly causalist account of basing can accommodate basing on absences.

Since Davidson's influential paper where he argued that reasons are causes (Davidson (1963)), the simplest, most elegant, and most widely held view in action theory is the causalist view. The causalist view says that actions are behaviors that have the right kinds of causes—typically, things like beliefs and desires, intentions, etc. Arguably, this influential view of action can be naturally extended to an equally simple and plausible account of what makes a behavior, not just an action, but a *reasons-responsive* action, or a *free* action (or, at least, this is what Sartorio has argued for in Sartorio (2016), ch. 4, and Sartorio (2023), ch. 4; see also Arpaly and Schroeder (2014), section 3.7). And, when it comes to explaining reasons-responsiveness or freedom in this way, absences can do important work.

To illustrate, this is how Sartorio (2016, ch. 4, and 2023, ch. 4) accounts for free action in terms of responsiveness to absences:

Causalist account of free action: S's A-ing is free iff it's caused (in the right way) by a suitable range of absences of reasons to refrain from A-ing (typically, in addition to its being caused by reasons to A).

Take, for example, my action of eating the cookie on the plate during my friend's party. Imagine that this is something I did freely. On the causalist view under consideration, what makes it the case that I did it freely is the fact that my act was caused by a suitable range of absences of reasons (including a mix of prudential and moral reasons to refrain from eating the cookie, which were actually absent). For example, I may have done it partly because it wasn't the last cookie on the plate (it's impolite to eat the last cookie). I may have done it partly because I didn't believe that it would give me a stomachache (I don't want to get a stomachache). I may have done it partly because I didn't promise my friend that I would save that cookie for him (I should keep my promises). And so on and so forth.

In contrast, compare my behavior to that of the "Cookie Monster" (the endearing Sesame Street character), or someone who was irresistibly compelled to eating cookies, and who wouldn't have acted freely in those circumstances. The Cookie Monster is not sensitive to whether those reasons are present or absent: he's disposed to eat the cookie basically no matter what, or under a wide range of circumstances where eating the cookie would have been seriously imprudent or immoral). Thus, the Cookie Monster's compulsive act lacks a causal explanation involving complex patterns of absences of reasons to refrain—it is much more plainly explained in terms of the *actual* reasons that moved him to act.

On this view, then, what distinguishes free or reasons-responsive behaviors from unfree or non-reasons-responsive behaviors is, not the causal relevance of the actual reasons that move

us to act, but that of the absences of the non-actual reasons to refrain from acting. This is, of course, not to say that we need be consciously aware of such absences of reasons or of our causal sensitivity to them. But we need to be *in fact* sensitive to those absences of reasons in order to act freely.

Also, the claim about causal sensitivity needn't be, and probably shouldn't be, explained in counterfactual terms, for the kinds of reasons mentioned above. Namely, counterfactual sensitivity is, if anything, a sign of actual sensitivity rather than a ground of it: in normal cases where we are causally sensitive we are also counterfactually sensitive, but in abnormal cases (such as those involving Frankfurt-type interveners) we are not. This is because, put in terms of more technical philosophical lingo: causation and counterfactual dependence typically go hand in hand, but, as anybody invested in the causation literature is well aware of, causation doesn't reduce to simple counterfactual dependence (Lewis (1986)).

Still, the causalist view of free action faces the same potential problem as the causalist view of basing. Namely, what if some metaphysicians are right and absences cannot be causes? What is a causalist to do about this problem?

At this point, the safest bet is to appeal to a fallback position, one that doesn't necessarily require the possibility of absence causation (although it's of course open to it), but only of an explanatory relation that, if it's not causation itself, is very much like causation and inherits most of its relevant features. Let this be "ersatz" causation, or "quasi" causation, or "causal explanation" or what have you (see, e.g., Dowe (2001) and Beebe (2004)). The main point here is simple: even if absences could not cause things, they would still explain things, or be part of the full explanations of things. This seems obviously true, since without absences we're left with lots of important holes in our explanations of events. When I freely take the cookie from the plate, for example, the fact that my friend didn't want the cookie or the fact that it wasn't the last cookie on the plate is clearly part of what explains why I took it, and in a way that differs from the Cookie Monster's act, regardless of how exactly this difference should be cashed out in metaphysical terms (e.g., if in causalist or "quasi"-causalist terms).

Thus, a causalist can appeal to the explanatory power of absences, whatever that power exactly amounts to in metaphysical terms, to cash out the view under consideration. The result is a view that is still "causalist" in spirit, if not in letter. For the underlying thought is still that, in the case of free action, what makes an action free is a matter of what *actually explains* it—and not, say, the agent's having access to alternative possibilities of action. Similarly, in the epistemic case, the main thought would still be that the basing requirement on doxastic justification is a matter of what *actually explains* the belief—including the positive evidence that causes the belief in the right way as well as the absences that cause (or quasi-cause, or otherwise explain) the belief.¹⁰

¹⁰ Moreover, the resulting "quasi-causalist" views are not completely removed from causation altogether, for those quasi-causal concepts are themselves plausibly grounded in causation: they're grounded in counterfactual causation, or in what *would* cause what. For more on this, see Sartorio (2023), ch. 3, pp. 41-6.

Thus, we think we can safely conclude that a theorist interested in giving a causalist account of basing (or one that is broadly causalist in spirit) can, and should, incorporate basing on absences. To remain neutral on certain metaphysical debates about the causal status of absences, such a theorist should appeal to a metaphysically neutral view of the following kind:

Quasi-causalist theory of basing: *S*'s belief that *p* is based on *e* iff *e* causes (or quasi-causes, or otherwise explains) *p* in the right way.

In our view, this gives causalists in epistemology as well as in action theory what they want without forcing them to take a stand on certain underlying metaphysical debates that they should arguably remain neutral on.

6. Disqualifiers

We are now in a position to deal with disqualifiers. Recall our main example of a disqualifier: Amy says that Bob said that the mushroom is edible. Amy is a reliable reporter of Bob's testimony, and so on her say-so you are justified in believing that Bob said that the mushroom is edible, and thus justified in believing that the mushroom is edible. But Bob, overhearing Amy, then says: "That's right, that mushroom is edible." In that case, you are still doxastically justified in believing that the mushroom is edible, but only if you believe it on the basis of Bob's own testimony. Bob's testimony "screens off" Amy's testimony and thus acts as a disqualifier. Or, at least, that is what Muñoz (2019) argues, and we'll follow him here.

Now, what if Bob never gives his own testimony? Does your belief have to be sensitive to the absence of Bob's testimony in order for it to be justified (on the basis of Amy's testimony)? If disqualifiers were on a par with defeaters, this is what one would have to say. One would have to say that, in order to be doxastically justified in believing that the mushroom is edible on the basis of Amy's testimony, you must be sensitive to (not just the absence of defeaters of different kinds: rebutting, undercutting, and exogenous) this fact:

4. **Absence of a disqualifier.** Bob himself does not tell you that the mushroom is edible.

However, interestingly, disqualifiers cannot be dealt with in the same way we dealt with defeaters. As we have seen, in the case of defeaters, in order for the agent to be justified in holding a certain belief, the belief must be properly sensitive to the absence of defeaters in the sense that the absence of defeaters must explain the belief. In the "good" cases, that is what happens for defeaters: the absence of defeaters explains the belief. But that is not what happens for disqualifiers: in the "good" case, where you believe it on the basis of Amy's testimony but that basis would have changed if Bob had told you himself, the absence of Bob's disqualifying testimony doesn't in any way explain the belief. You don't believe that the mushroom is edible

because Bob didn't tell you that himself. The absence of his direct testimony is only relevant to *why* you believe it, or to the basis on which you believe it, not to the fact *that* you believe it.¹¹

In this respect, the good case for disqualifiers is similar to the “bad” case (the case where you would still have believed it on the basis of Amy's testimony if Bob's direct testimony had been present). In both the good and the bad cases, the absence of Bob's direct testimony is not part of what explains your belief. If there is a difference between the good and the bad cases, it has to do, not with the causal or explanatory relations themselves, but with what *grounds* them.¹² For, in the good case, you base the belief on Amy's testimony partly by virtue of the fact that Bob's direct testimony is absent. This is not true of the bad case: in the bad case, the basis for your belief is not sensitive to the absence of Bob's direct testimony.

In sum: *if* we think that the agent is only justified in the good case but not in the bad case, this means that we must add an extra condition on what constitutes a good basis for a belief:

Extra-causal condition: in order for S's belief that *p* to be justified, S's belief must be (i) caused (or otherwise explained) by the relevant features of your total evidence, and (ii) that causal (explanatory) relation itself must be grounded in the absence of disqualifying evidence.

Now, unlike the quasi-causalist account discussed above, this extra-causal condition *does* seem to go against the spirit of a purely causalist account, at least to an important extent. For it implies that the basing requirement on doxastic justification is *not* just a matter of what actually explains the belief; other things matter too.

In response, a causalist might be inclined to accept this and argue that it doesn't stray *too* far from the original causalist idea because it only accepts the relevance of the grounds of actual causes or explanations. But, again, this is different from the quasi-causalist amendment discussed above in that it involves a commitment to an additional requirement: not only must our beliefs be caused or explained in a certain way, but those causal or explanatory relations themselves must be grounded in a certain way. Note that this isn't just to say that they *can* be grounded in a certain way, but that they *must* be. A causalist can certainly grant that, when the relevant causal or explanatory relations are grounded in other facts, those grounds are themselves relevant, in some indirect way, to the justification of the belief, or to the freedom exercised in the action (as discussed in Sartorio (2022) and (2023)). However, to claim that those causal relations *must* be grounded in a specific way is a stronger and more controversial claim—one that, it could be argued, definitely constitutes a move away from the original causalist motivations.

¹¹ It would indeed be a bad thing to come to believe that the mushroom is edible on the basis of the *absence* of Bob's direct testimony. For, if anything, it is the *presence* of that testimony that constitutes a reason to hold the belief. And, arguably, if *e* would have been evidence for *p*, the absence of *e* cannot be evidence for *p* (we argue for this general principle about evidence in Comesaña and Sartorio (2014)).

¹² The grounds of causes which are not causes themselves are sometimes called “ennoblers.” See, e.g., Yablo 2004, Muñoz 2019, Baron-Schmitt 2021, and Sartorio 2023: 36.

But there is another possible take on disqualifiers, which we are more inclined to embrace. It is to say that you are *actually* justified in both cases, the “good” and the “bad” case, and in this important respect disqualifiers are different from defeaters. We are granting Muñoz that, if Bob *had* given his testimony, then you wouldn’t have been justified in believing what you believe *on the basis of Amy’s testimony*, because then a better basis would have been present. But this doesn’t mean that you are not justified in believing what you believe in the *actual* case, even in the actual *bad* case, for there Amy’s testimony is the only basis available.

The thought here is this: if what the basing requirement on doxastic justification says is, basically, that you should believe for good reasons (or on the basis of your total evidence), and if those were the best reasons *actually* available to you, then you *are* justified in the actual “bad” disqualifier case, after all. Of course, there is still something bad about you as an epistemic agent in that case. But what is bad about you is not that you are not justified in the actual scenario; rather, it is something that has to do with your dispositions to respond to evidence in counterfactual scenarios, such as the scenario where Bob’s testimony is present.

Note that defeaters are different in this respect because, as we have seen, the absence of defeaters *is* part of your total evidence for the belief. Thus, you wouldn’t be believing for good reasons (on the basis of your total evidence) if you weren’t to believe it partly because of the absence of defeaters. But, in the case of disqualifiers, this isn’t true: the absence of disqualifiers is *not* part of your total evidence for the belief. Thus, arguably, you are still believing for good reasons (for the best reasons available) when you believe it on the basis of Amy’s testimony. This is so even if you’re an imperfect epistemic agent who wouldn’t have been justified in other cases where disqualifiers were present.

An analogy with action theory can help here too. As we have mentioned, following Frankfurt, causalists about free action have embraced the idea that all that matters to whether an agent acts freely is what actually moves the agent to act. On this view, the mechanisms that would have moved the agent to act in other counterfactual scenarios are not relevant to the agent’s freedom in the actual circumstances. Imagine, for example, someone who is actually moved to act in the normal way, by his own deliberation and consideration of reasons. Imagine that that same agent suffers from a series of compulsions or other freedom-undermining mechanisms that would have been triggered in a range of counterfactual scenarios and that would have prevented him from acting freely in those scenarios. The existence of those “bad” counterfactual cases, the causalist would say, does not detract from the fact that the agent acts freely in the actual case. Similarly, our causalist can say the same thing about (absent) disqualifiers: the existence of bad counterfactual cases doesn’t make our epistemic agent any less justified in the actual case.

7. Dogmatism

It may seem that our view conflicts with a popular view in epistemology: Pryor’s dogmatism. We do not think it would be bad if it did, but we also do not think that it is obvious that it does.

Pryor's dogmatism is the thesis that experience can provide *prima facie* but immediate justification for belief. The justification is *prima facie* because it can be defeated, but it is immediate in that it does not rest on your justification for believing anything else—in particular, it does not rest on your justification for believing that you have no defeaters. So, for instance, if you have an experience with the content that there is a red wall in front of you, then this experience gives you *prima facie* justification for believing that there is a red wall in front of you, and if this justification is not defeated then it provides you with all things considered justification. Moreover, this justification is immediate in that it does not rest on any justification you may have for believing any other proposition. In particular, it does not rest on propositional justification for believing that there are no defeaters for your belief. So, for instance, your justification for believing that there is a red wall in front of you does not rest on your having propositional justification for believing that it is not the case that there are red lights shining on the wall.

Whether our view has consequences regarding this kind of dogmatism depends on subtle issues about the role of experience in justification. For example, not all of us believe that experiences themselves are part of the evidence on which we base our beliefs—some of us think that experiences provide us with their content as evidence (see, for instance, Comesaña (2020a)). But let's set that aside, and let us consider a generalization of dogmatism according to which evidence in general can provide *prima facie* but immediate justification for belief. According to this generalization, for instance, in case 1 Amy's testimony by itself provides you with *prima facie* but immediate justification for believing that the mushroom is edible. That the justification is immediate means, as before, that it does not depend on your having propositional justification for believing anything else.

Our view might conflict with this. For your justification for believing that the mushroom is edible depends on the absence of Bob's testimony to the contrary, and thus on our view your doxastic justification does depend on your sensitivity to this absence. And it might well be that this sensitivity provides you with propositional justification for thinking that Bob's defeating testimony is absent. We rejected above the doxastic view of sensitivity to absences, so we do not think that you need to actually believe that Bob's defeating testimony is absent, but arguably your sensitivity to this absence does provide you with *propositional* justification for believing that it is absent. If so, and if we are right that this sensitivity is required for you to be justified in believing that the mushroom is edible, then your justification for this belief does depend on your justification for believing that Bob's defeater is absent.

We heavily qualified the claim that our view might conflict with the letter of dogmatism, and for good reasons. For the conflict might be avoided. All that strictly speaking follows from our view is that your justification for believing that the mushroom is edible depends on your sensitivity to the absence of defeaters. Such a sensitivity, in turn, arguably gives you justification for the belief that defeaters are absent. But this doesn't immediately entail that your justification for the former belief depends on your justification for the latter. Rather, the justification for both beliefs depends on (is grounded in) the same thing—your sensitivity to the absence of defeaters. It is obviously not true in general that when two beliefs both depend on the same

third factor, then one of them depends on the other. For starters, such common dependence would not give us a reason to think that one specific belief depends on the other rather than the other way around—and the kind of epistemic dependence at issue seems to be antisymmetric, although some coherentists would deny this.

It is not at all clear, then, that our view conflicts even with the spirit of dogmatism. Notably, Pryor uses his dogmatism to provide an answer to global skepticism. For consider the skeptical scenario that you are a brain in a vat all of whose experiences have been produced by a computer. Pryor thinks that even in this case your experiences provide you with *prima facie* but immediate justification for believing that things are as your experiences purports them to be. In particular, you are justified in trusting your experiences even in the absence of prior justification for believing that you are not a brain in a vat. In fact, Pryor thinks that you may *acquire* justification for believing that you are not a brain in a vat from your justification for believing that things are as your experiences purports them to be.

Our view is compatible with this application of Pryor's dogmatism, and this is because, as Pryor himself points out, global skeptical scenarios are not defeaters for our ordinary beliefs. Remember that we acquire a defeater only if we are justified in believing the corresponding proposition. Thus, if Bob says that the mushroom is not edible, Bob's testimony provides us with a defeater for our justification for trusting Amy's testimony to the contrary only because we are justified in believing Bob. But we are never justified in believing global skeptical scenarios—this is what their being *global* consists in. We could have some justification for believing that we are a brain in a vat—for instance, as Pryor suggests, we could experience a ticker-tape at the bottom of our visual experience saying “you are a brain in a vat”. But if so, that would not be a global skeptical scenario. A global skeptical scenario is one where *all* of your evidence is misleading. Thus, by definition we could not have evidence (and thus become justified in believing) that we are in a global skeptical scenario. And then being in a global skeptical scenario is not a defeater.

In other words: were you in a global skeptical scenario, you would still be justified in believing everything that you are actually justified in believing. Thus, you need not be sensitive to the absence of evidence that you are in a global skeptical scenario—simply because there is no such possible evidence. Our view regarding the requirement of basing your beliefs on the absence of defeaters is thus compatible with Pryor's contention that you can be justified in believing ordinary propositions without having prior justification for believing that you are not the victim of global skeptical scenarios—although some of us have *other* views incompatible with that (see, again, Comesaña (2020a)).

8. Conclusion

Doxastic justification requires taking into account your total evidence. We argued that this means that your beliefs must be based on what is absent from your total evidence as well as what is present. We also argued that, on this, the epistemic case closely mirrors the practical

case: for, to be justified, your actions must also be based on absences. This might require some modification to the causalist picture of reasons for action and beliefs, but the modified view is still well within the spirit of the causalist conception in that it can make reference to actual explanations instead of causation by absences. We also argued that disqualifiers might well require a different treatment than defeaters, and that our view might well be compatible with Pryor's dogmatism.¹³

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