

***Epistemic Poverty, Subjectivism, and the Concept of Epistemic Justification: An Additional Reply to Lockie***<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

In this response to Robert Lockie’s recent *SERRC* entry “Response to Elqayam, Nottelmann, Peels and Vahid on my paper ‘Epistemic Poverty, Internalism, and Justified Belief’” I argue that his rejoinders to my previous debate contribution “Epistemic Poverty, Internalism, and Justified Belief: A Response to Robert Lockie” misrepresent two important aspects of my argument. First, I did not disrespect Lockie’s empirical sources. Second, and most importantly, I did not endorse or hypostasize a reliabilist conception of epistemic justification. Thus, Lockie’s central counter-arguments do not undermine my original set of objections. However, in his reply Lockie offers substantial self-termed “glimpses” into his “larger epistemological project” and into his preferred stripe of “deontic internalism”. Those glimpses seem to provide some material for a more nuanced engagement with the so-called poverty objection, even if I argue that an important version of that objection remains in force.

I thank Robert Lockie for his comprehensive response to the comments by myself and others on his recent *Social Epistemology* article “Perspectivism, Deontologism and Epistemic Poverty” (2016a). Exchanges like the present are a welcome opportunity to clarify one’s thoughts on the disputed philosophical issues. Certainly, the current exchange has made me aware of nuances and provenances, which were less clear on my radar beforehand. Also, this exchange offers me an occasion to express my developing position on the contested issues as clearly as possible, taking into account readings of my previous writings diverting from the intended ones. Thus, I am grateful for being able here to offer the neutral reader clarifications with regard to my first criticism of Lockie. Below, I hope further to highlight the aspects of his reasoning, which I regard as puzzling and problematic. This reply article is meant as a supplement to my first one. Thus, I shall not spell out again the rather complex arguments of my first reply, but focus instead on Lockie’s misrepresentations and distortions of those arguments.

One appealing aspect of Lockie’s response is its firm focus on meta-epistemological issues. It makes admirably clear our agreement that as a champion of a deontological conception of epistemic justification Lockie must have his eyes set on developing and defending a plausible subjectivist account.<sup>2</sup> Before assessing the merits of Lockie’s new reflections, however, I want to set straight two of his central misconceptions regarding my first response.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Jim Collier for his role as moderator of this discussion and to all other participants for their insightful contributions.

<sup>2</sup> See Nottelmann (2016, 16).

## Two Central Misconceptions Corrected

### 1. I did not mean to be disrespectful towards Lockie's empirical sources.

Lockie submits that I and other respondents with a background in “classic normative epistemology” (2016b, 21) have shown too little respect for the anthropological and cognitive-psychological research harnessed by his original article. Our armchairs apparently are not situated on the high ground here. In particular he finds that we have offered “easy ‘conceptual’ solutions” where none are due, thus overlooking “*real, serious, deep*, cognitive differences” (2016b, 45; italics in original). I cannot speak for all defendants here, but personally I plead innocent of those charges. What Lockie construes as an implicit “major concession” (2016b, 45) on my part, in fact was always out in the open.

Thus, in my first response I submitted that Luria and Vygotsky's field work on Uzbek peasants constitutes very poor evidence in favor of widespread irrationality in those subjects (2016, 18) and (correctly, it seems) took myself to agree with Lockie here. I also explicitly granted that the Uzbeks did in fact base very many of their important decisions on epistemically rational assumptions (2016, 17). My homespun “gorilla example” (2016, 19) was only intended to bring out those points in a suggestive fashion. To sum up, Lockie misrepresents my view here. We always explicitly agreed that typical “contextualized thinkers”<sup>3</sup> are epistemically rational, at least in the sense that such thinkers hold very many perfectly rational beliefs. Also, we always shared an admiration for intrepid anthropological fieldwork such as that of Luria and Vygotsky.

Our only substantial disagreement here seems to concern the relevance of (epistemic) rationality *tout court*, and of one type of agent being *on a whole* more or less rational than another type. Thus, for Lockie it often seems very important not to have native “contextualized thinkers” come out less rational *on a whole* as compared to us “non-WEIRD” educated modern westerners.<sup>4</sup> To me, such talk makes dubious sense: How would one even begin to compare subjects for rationality in a wholesale manner, taking into fair account the many relevant doxastic domains and contexts, in which they might be compared? Perhaps, though, Lockie agrees here. For example, he writes of “the wholesale impossibility of finding ‘culture fair’ equivalences between WEIRD and non-WEIRD thinkers” (2016b, 36). But in that case, why even bother, as seemingly he often does, with the *total* rationality of agents rather than the rationality of their specific beliefs?

As I see it, such reflections mostly distract from the central issue: If we aim for an appropriate understanding of epistemic justification, first and foremost that understanding must get right the notion of an epistemically justified belief. Whether or not the holder of that belief is also rational on a whole, is another question, which may not even have a sensible answer. Also, I believe, we honor best the impressive legacy of pioneering

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<sup>3</sup> C.f. Lockie (2016b, 45).

<sup>4</sup> Lockie (2016b, 36). The term “non-WEIRD” stems from Lockie's somewhat sarcastic implication that his culturally insensitive opponents crudely divide subjects into WEIRD and non-WEIRD specimens.

empirical researchers like Luria and Vygotsky by drawing the right meta-epistemological conclusions from their work, if any such conclusions may in fact reasonably be drawn. I fail to perceive as a sign of disrespect caution in drawing such inferences.

## **2. I never relied on an “objectivist” (reliabilist) conception of epistemic justification.**

Lockie’s second misunderstanding is the more serious one: He takes my first response to rely on a highly objectivist conception of epistemic justification. He quotes the second premise of my initial reconstruction of the poverty objection, and takes it to “sum up” where he and I differ. He also misleadingly labels that reconstruction “Nottelmann’s argument” (2016b, 42). The crucial premise of that initial reconstruction was:

[BonJour-style understanding of epistemic reason-goodness] In order for a reason to be a good epistemic reason for S to believe p in C, in C S must have a fairly high chance of believing the truth concerning p, should she believe as the reason indicates.<sup>5</sup>

However, the argument from which the above premise is lifted was not an argument endorsed by me in the context. Rather, I set up that argument in order clearly to mark a target for Lockie to attack, since I felt that no such target was sufficiently explicated in his original article. I thought it fair to mold that target on Laurence BonJour’s 2002 version of the poverty objection. After all, in his original article Lockie explicitly refers to BonJour’s contemporary work on the issue.<sup>6</sup>

Most importantly, I explicitly reconstructed a BonJour-style poverty objection argument in order clearly to bring out that Lockie’s strategy towards this type of argument must rely on successfully *attacking* premise (2). Thus I submitted that here “the defender of DCEJ [i.e. the deontological conception of epistemic justification] faces the principal task of arguing against (2)” (2016, 16). Lockie seems wholeheartedly to agree. For example, he makes no secret of the fact that he preferred BonJour’s epistemology in its more subjectivist 1985 installment (2016b, fn14).

Thus, my first overall argument against Lockie did in no way rely on the truth of anything close to premise (2). Rather, it relied on the more complex claim that even if Lockie brings down premise (2), his conception of epistemic justification is not for that reason subjectivist enough successfully to counter a more general poverty objection. Exactly *how* subjectivist must it be in order to confront that general objection? Very subjectivist indeed, according to my first response. Admittedly, I observed in passing that a poverty objection stands, if a broadly reliabilist necessary requirement for epistemic justification holds (as was embedded in premise (2)). But my far more important claim was that in general a poverty objection may in fact do with “any other conception [of a necessary requirement for epistemic justification], which leaves....sufficient room to argue that a believer could irresistibly believe on reasons, whose epistemic goodness is merely apparent” (2016, 22).

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<sup>5</sup> See Nottelmann (2016, 14), quoted Lockie (2016b, 42).

<sup>6</sup> Not least BonJour (2003).

I refer the interested reader to my first response for a full defense of this claim. Here the following quick sketch will hopefully suffice: No conception of epistemic justification can afford to collapse the distinction between reasons that are *really* epistemically sufficient, and reasons that are only apparently so (e.g. from the believing subject's momentary perspective). Given such a collapse an important point of epistemic appraisal would certainly be lost. There would no longer be an epistemic point in refining and broadening one's subjective perspective, since one would be perfectly epistemically rational anyway simply in virtue of believing by one's present seemings. Now, arguably certain epistemic subjects are impoverished in the sense that irresistibly they believe by reasons, which *appear* epistemically sufficient from their momentary personal perspective, even if they are not. Still, "ought, implies can": If those beliefs are irresistible, they are also blameless. Anyone regarding blameless belief as sufficient for epistemically rational belief thus seems committed to accept the collapse in such cases: We have here a case of "rational" belief, which is *only* backed by sufficient reasons as seen from an entirely idiosyncratic perspective. But, as was pointed out earlier, this collapse is unacceptable: Thus, we should not declare such beliefs "rational", even if they are blameless.

### **Back to the Poverty Objection**

In my first response, I argued in some detail that even a fairly radical access-internalist conception of epistemic justification is not "subjective" enough to overcome the worries mentioned just above: An access-internalist is committed to the epistemic irrelevance of anything but subjectively accessible reasons. Still, an impoverished subject could, due to no fault of her own, fail to take into account the force of her total accessible evidence when forming a specific belief. This would make that belief blameless, yet irrational, *pace* the deontological conception.<sup>7</sup>

Has Lockie's new response done anything to set aside those objections? He now explicitly concedes the central premise of my *actual* argument: It is unacceptable to collapse the distinction between apparent and actual epistemic justification. To quote two passages from Lockie:

... if it seems to you that you're justified, you are. This represents a level of anti-realism whereby ... the 'appearance' of justification has become identified with the *reality* thereof ... [W]e may call this *Conceptual Limit-Panglossianism*. I take it that this is a limit position no-one should want to occupy (2016b, 23).<sup>8</sup>

Nottelmann is right to say that an unconstrained epistemology, one in which there was no separation between "really good [reasons] (relative to a subject and a situation) from those that are only apparently so", would be utterly unacceptable. (2016b, 39).

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<sup>7</sup> See here Nottelmann 2016, 24-26.

<sup>8</sup> I trust that my syntactic simplifications do no damage to Lockie's central point here.

Later in his response, however, it is as if Lockie fears to have conceded *too much* in passages like the above. Seemingly, he now problematizes the very distinction between apparent and actual epistemic justification:

Drawing an epistemology-metaphysics distinction is normally a benign realist move in philosophy ... *But we are within epistemology here: we are within the domain of ‘appearances’, indeed, we are within the domain concerning with the epistemology of ‘reasons’.* We can apply an epistemology-metaphysics distinction within epistemology, granted (we can be as iterative—unkindly, one might say ‘regressive’—as you like) but we are concerning with epistemic justification here, we are concerned with ‘appearances’ ... with justified belief where this has not been hypostatized, transformed, and transmogrified into something metaphysical (2016b, 44; italics in original).

I am not exactly sure what Lockie has in mind here. What follows, hopefully is fair to Lockie’s intended message. Seemingly, what he finds especially objectionable is a perceived tendency to turn the conceded observation about non-collapsibility into a defense of any kind of objectivism. This seems to be what he has in mind, when writing of “transmogrifying” epistemic justification into “something metaphysical” (e.g. modelled on a correspondence conception of truth). Yet, as was already brought out above, this fear should not concern my first response, which did *not* rely on correspondence or anything of the kind: *Pace* Lockie, on the contrary I argued at some length that the distinction (and the threat of its collapse) is not at all particular to any kind of objectivism, but may be drawn even on the basis of highly “subjective” conceptions of epistemic justification. And Lockie seems to agree that even radically “egocentric” conceptions must shun the collapse (2016b, 23-24).

Objectivist ghosts aside, why should we think it the least problematic to contrast actual justification with apparent justification? Is this procedure, for example, in any problematic sense “iterative” or “regressive”? I think not. Surely we may “iterate” and distinguish apparent justification from justification that is only *apparently* apparent. But first, what sense could we make of the latter category except justification that is actual (i.e. not merely apparent after all)? And second, what theoretical point would there be in cutting such a second-order distinction? I deem that any iteration here would not only quickly come to a halt, but would also be entirely unmotivated. Finally, does Lockie’s claim that “within epistemology” we are “concerned with appearances” induce any specific reason for caution, so as to fear the illegitimacy of what would otherwise be a benign “realist” move? I fail to see any such reasons.

Perhaps Lockie here conflates various aspects of believing and the ways in which those aspects may be merely apparent: Surely, it makes no sense to declare *the subjective appearance* of rationality “merely apparent”; rather it is robustly there as a psychological phenomenon: When it appears to a subject that she is rational in believing some content, that “appearance” constitutes a psychological occurrence, which may not be sensibly

contrasted with its “really” being so. However, the *normative status* of her belief is a very different issue. Here it seems perfectly sensible (perhaps even mandatory, as Lockie has earlier agreed), to distinguish between beliefs that enjoy the normative status of epistemic justification from beliefs that only appear to do so as seen from some idiosyncratic perspective.

To describe this latter sensible contrast as one between “epistemology” and “metaphysics”, as is Lockie’s preference, seems a bit excessive; like describing in equally loaded terms the contrast between my bicycle’s front tire being flat and its seeming flat on a rocky road. If anything, the relevant contrast is purely “metaphysical”: Between something’s having a property and its not having it. Yet, terminology shall not part us here. What matters is that Lockie has accepted the non-collapse of epistemic justification, and has done nothing to render problematic the crucial distinction between justified belief and belief only apparently justified. Thus, he has also committed himself to rejecting any conception of epistemic justification committed to that collapse. May he still hope to salvage his preferred brand of “deontic internalism”?<sup>9</sup>

In his response (2016b), Lockie presents his epistemological position at a level of detail not easily discernible from his original article (i.e. 2016a). Certainly, for that reason his response moves the debate much forward. Still, Lockie hardly spells out exactly how his preferred deontic conception of epistemic justification disarms the poverty objection, even if he states that it involves a complex access-restriction on epistemic reasons, which “comes much later” relative to that conception’s “deontic core” (2016b, fn13; 33).<sup>10</sup> The relevant type of access demands not only “reasons responsiveness”, but also “reasons reactivity: the ability to direct and regulate one’s cognition—say to initiate and shape a process of reasoning leading to a solution to a given problem” (2016b, 33).

In short, Lockie regards the relevant kind of access as “an umbrella term for the ‘can’ component of OIC [Ought Implies Can]” (2016b, 33). I interpret the relevant import of those self-termed “glimpses of Lockie’s larger epistemological project” to be this: In order for a subject to be blamed for holding a belief due to her failure to take into account certain contrary reasons, not only must she be able passively to respond to those reasons; she must also possess the ability actively to regulate her cognition in response to them.

If this is even roughly close to the deontic position Lockie has in mind, a version of the poverty objection still sticks: A subject can hardly be exempt from blame simply because *presently* she does not manifest the relevant reasons-involving abilities relative to the belief under evaluation. If so, we are back with the dreaded collapse: Each time a subject

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<sup>9</sup> Thus Lockie: “I think I have made very clear in my paper [i.e. 2016a] the sole conception of this term [i.e. “internalism” regarding epistemic justification] which interests me: deontic internalism whereby the deontic normative core comes first and the accessibilist restrictions....come a long way after.” 2016b, fn 13.

<sup>10</sup> Rather surprisingly, Lockie submits those specifications “pace Nottelmann”. For my part, I never defended any view regarding the most natural understanding of epistemic internalism, even if, perhaps misleadingly, I labelled some understandings as “standard”. Here I only meant to observe that unproblematically the poverty objection goes through even on several text book internalist understandings of epistemic justification.

forms a belief due to not exerting her cognitively abilities, automatically she becomes epistemically rational. In order to exempt her, her inability to take those reasons into account must be more principled.

In other words, she must be *epistemically impoverished* with regard to those contrary reasons in the sense that she must simply be unable to take them into account at the relevant time (“actively” as well as “passively”). However, this does not preclude that she be able to take those reasons into proper account and recognize their undermining character given better reasoning conditions, for example, if she is given more time for reflection. Assume this to be the case in a particular example. Now, when such a subject first forms a belief, given that “ought implies can” she is blameless: Her disposition and cognitive abilities are such that she cannot help but quickly forming that belief, ignoring the (subtle) contrary evidence. Yet, when soon she has had sufficient opportunity to take into account the contrary evidence, which is now “accessible” to her in Lockie’s preferred sense, she need no longer be blameless, should she hold on to her initial belief.

Assume now that she holds onto her original quickly formed belief, and her evaluation of her reasons remains unaltered, even if she had the opportunity to improve it by exercising her relevant reasons-related abilities. Should we say that her belief is now irrational, where at first it was rational, since it is no longer blameless? At least to me, this sounds highly odd. Rather, it would seem natural to describe her as holding onto an irrational belief. On a par, if she should later exercise her cognitive abilities and come to recognize the force of her contrary reasons, it would be natural to describe her as having found out the irrationality of her original belief. Taking blameless belief to suffice for rational belief still seems an odd proposition.

Putting all of this into a real-life example may be helpful. Suppose the protagonist of our story is a Caucasian male called Harry, born and raised in a radically racist environment such as the Ku Klux Klan. As an adult, he has left the klan and has become aware of the severe indoctrinating effects of that environment. He is now firmly convinced (at least on a theoretical level) that typical racist beliefs are false. For example he now believes, in contrast to his former self, that the darkness of another person’s skin does not in itself constitute evidence against that person’s professional competence.

Yet, cognitive habits are hard to overcome. On one occasion, under some stress Harry needs to pick a local plumber for mending his leaking water piping. Nervously looking in the directory for contractors he quickly concludes that Ms. Claire White is better fit for the job than Ms. Ebony Washington, and calls on Ms. White to make an emergency visit. Suppose that ample reasons here indicate a much superior level of plumbing competence on Ms. Washington’s part. Her advertisement in the directory is embellished with easily visible pieces of testimony from many years of satisfied clients, whereas Ms. White’s entry demonstrates a low level of professional care. Harry notices this, even if it has no immediate effects on him. Still, under the circumstances, plausibly we may exempt Harry from blame with regard to his initial belief formation: Given the particular stressful situation, he was unable immediately to manifest his recently acquired reasons-related competences, and an irresistibly strong gut reaction honed by his racist upbringing kicked

in. However, soon after, Harry's nerves are calmer and he is capable of a much more refined reflection on his evidence.

Suppose he realizes that he probably called on the much inferior plumber. Shouldn't we say then that he became aware of the irrationality of his first racist belief? And if he sticks with his gut reaction, despite having had ample opportunity to exercise his reasons-related abilities, shouldn't we say not only that he is blameworthy, but also that he *persists* in irrationality? It would seem highly odd (not least for Harry himself) to regard his initial racist gut response to the evidence as a rational one, simply because it was *blameless* due to the non-fulfillment of relevant access-conditions.

## Conclusions

As should be evident from the above, I acknowledge that Lockie's strategy of spelling out the "subjective perspective" relevant to deontic appraisal in terms of a complex of reasons-related abilities holds some promise with regard to confronting the poverty objection. At least it is no longer obvious that the relevant subjective perspective is so subjective such as disastrously to collapse the distinction between justified and unjustified belief. Nevertheless, Lockie's "deontic internalism", as he describes it, still seems to deem certain beliefs rational (because blameless due to epistemic poverty), even if they ought to come out irrational. Perhaps there is no dramatic knock-down argument against a suitably refined version of "deontic internalism". In that case, probably Lockie is well advised to pursue his grander project of refining his preferred version of that position in the light of on-going discussions like the present.

Still, on my view Lockie is looking in the wrong place for a fully satisfactory conception of epistemic rationality: That concept denotes a normative status which we may cherish and to which we may meaningfully aspire in a different sense from that in which we may cherish and aspire to mere blamelessness. Suppose, for example, that our protagonist from above, the ex-klansman Harry, suffers a slight brain lesion that sets back his hard won progress in terms of freeing himself from racist thought patterns. After the lesion he can no longer resist forming and sustaining racist beliefs as those typical of his early youth. Every time he sees a dark-skinned man on the street he stubbornly judges that person to be a vicious thug or an imbecile. Seen from a purely deontic perspective, Harry should consider this lesion an epistemic blessing: After all it frees him of relevant access to a great many reasons, thus securing him blameless belief, where otherwise he would be troubled by the risk of blameworthiness.

Yet surely, from the perspective of rationality, Harry should lament this condition and consider it a pernicious evil, in so far as it prevents him from taking into proper account relevant reasons. Lockie may be right that in some sense an excessively objectivist conception of epistemic justification risks missing out on the importance of the "contextualized thinker's cultural construction of the world" (2016b, 36). Yet, seemingly a radically subjective "deontic internalism" of Lockie's stripe misses out on *another* highly important aspect of the typical subjective existence: The valuable project of personal epistemic progress and amelioration by way of transcending one's current

“constructions”. Even if nothing in my original set of objections hinged on it, my preference would be to construe the ultimate goal of such epistemic amelioration factively in terms of goods like knowledge and understanding. I also believe this construal to be perfectly compatible with a fair assessment of the epistemic merits of subjects from non-western societies such as Luria and Vygotsky’s illiterate Uzbek peasants. But arguing this at length will have to wait for another occasion.

I want to close this response on a friendly note. On a whole, engaging with Lockie’s views has been an enjoyable and educational process. In that spirit I want to suggest that perhaps Lockie’s most important guiding idea is not so much that the poverty objection fails. Rather it is the methodological point that we should never assume subjects from thriving alien cultures to be radically epistemically impoverished and that consequently we should reject conceptions of epistemic justification that allow us quickly to jump to such conclusions. I have some sympathy with those principles, in the sense that they highlight the virtues of cultural sensitivity and intellectual curiosity within disciplines such as cultural anthropology and cognitive psychology. I hope it to be clear that I share with Lockie a deep respect for those virtues and all researchers embodying them.

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