

TRIANGULATION, CONTENT AND THE BASING RELATION¹

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Summary

It is widely believed that what distinguishes between a justifiable and a justified belief is the obtaining of an epistemic relation, the basing relation, whose nature and character has long been a controversial issue in epistemology. There are currently two major approaches to the problem of the basing relation, namely, the causal and doxastic theories. In this paper, after a brief survey of the field, I examine Alston's recent account of the basing relation, as input to psychologically realized functions, arguing that his way of identifying the functions in question presupposes what it seeks to establish as it merely replaces one kind of indeterminacy (with respect to the ground of a belief) with another (regarding the content of belief outputs). To avoid this problem, I suggest a version of Alston's account within a broadly Davidsonian framework.

A complete theory of justification is both an account of under what conditions a belief is justifiable (rational) as well as whether it is justified. A justifiable belief is one where an agent is said to have adequate grounds or evidence for the belief in question while a justified belief is one where the agent's belief is based on those adequate grounds. What distinguishes the two cases concerns the obtaining of an epistemic relation, the basing relation, whose nature and character are the main concerns of this paper. To set the stage for discussion, I begin by evaluating two major trends in the basing relation debate, viz., the causal and doxastic theories. My emphasis, though, will be on causal theories as it is widely believed that some version of the causal theory must be true. There is, however, disagreement as to how one should account for a major problem with such theories, i.e. the problem of deviant causal chains. I shall discuss and criticize one recent

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prominent solution to this problem before proposing my own (Davidsonian) gloss on causal theories. Let us then begin by a brief survey of the current approaches to the question of the basing relation.

1. *Main approaches to the basing relation: A survey and analysis*

The two major theories of the basing relation that have dominated the debate are the so-called causal and doxastic theories. Doxastic theories come in different varieties and strengths. Some hold that the necessary and sufficient conditions for a belief's being based on evidence consists in having a connecting or meta-belief to the effect that the evidence provides adequate support for the belief in question.² Others postulate such meta-beliefs only in connection with beliefs whose bases are doxastic rather than experiential.³ The doxastic approach is, however, beset by a number of problems. To begin with, as Alston emphasizes, our beliefs are often based on other beliefs or experiences where no such meta-beliefs are present. This can happen for a number of reasons. Cognizers can have based beliefs even if they lack epistemic concepts. That is, they can form beliefs in response to reasons without yet being able to conceive of those reasons as reasons.

Secondly, beliefs can be unconsciously formed on the basis of the pertinent grounds. Examples abound. Consider, for example, the phenomenon of subliminal cues when our depth perception is dependent on various cues of which we are typically unaware.⁴ As Harman puts it,

[a] man's conscious reasons are those he can tell us about. To equate reasons for which he believes something with reasons he can tell us about is to assume that reasons for which he believes something are conscious reasons. This is a mistake. The reason for which people believe things are rarely conscious. People often believe things for good reasons, which give the knowledge, even though they cannot say what those reasons are.⁵

Moreover, an agent, being mistaken about the basis of his belief, would fail to form the appropriate meta-belief even though, intuitively, his belief is based on the evidence at his disposal. These and other problems effectively

2. See, for example, Tolliver (1982).

3. Audi (1986).

4. Alston (2005, 87).

5. Harman (1970, 844).