Chapter 3

JUSTIFICATION AND PROPER BASING

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Though Lehrer’s arguments played a role in the abandonment of causal theories of knowledge, the epistemological community has not endorsed his view that a causal account of the basing relation is defective. In some cases, epistemologists have simply found Lehrer’s examples unpersuasive, and in other cases, they have argued against the conclusion Lehrer draws from his examples. I want to look at this issue here, for I think that there is more to be said on behalf of Lehrer’s view than has been appreciated. Causality is ubiquitous in nearly all of our experience of the world, but it is not conceptually involved in the concepts of knowledge or justification. In particular, Lehrer is right that the basing relation is not a species of causal relation.

A terminological point is in order before beginning. There is a sense in which, when someone denies that evidence needs to be causally responsible for belief in order for it to be doxastically justified or to count as knowledge, that person is denying that belief needs to be based on that evidence. After all, in such cases, belief is not causally grounded in, nor explained by, awareness of the evidence. That is not the concept of basing that is relevant here, however. What is central here is the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification. Two jurors, for example, can be presented with precisely the same evidence and both believe the defendant is innocent. One might believe this claim by attending to the evidence, and the other because his horoscope said, “you will need courage today to make a negative judgment about a very bad person.” In the second case, the juror does not attend to the evidence or even consider the question of whether the evidence confirms the guilt of the defendant. He hears the evidence and forms beliefs about it, but this experience is not connected at all with his belief. So, whereas the first juror is doxastically justified and may know, on the basis of the evidence, that the defendant is guilty, the second juror only has propositional justification and fails to know on the basis of the evidence that the defendant is guilty. The concept of basing that is relevant here is that concept central to this distinction. Even if there are other concepts of basing on which a person can be said to know without basing belief on evidence (because the evidence doesn’t cause the belief), the concept of concern here is that concept in virtue of which we distinguish candidates for knowledge in terms of whether the person has doxastic or merely propositional justification for belief.

1. **LEHRER’S EXAMPLES**

We can begin with Lehrer’s examples. The first case concerns a gypsy lawyer of a client accused of eight murders. The lawyer consults the Tarot cards, and they say that the client is guilty of committing all but the eighth murder. The lawyer believes what the cards say, and his conviction of the innocence of his client regarding the eighth murder leads him to reconsider the
evidence, which he now comes to see conclusively establishes that his client is innocent of the eighth murder. Lehrer then goes on to claim:

He freely admits, however, that the evidence which he claims shows that he knows his client to be innocent of that crime is not what convinced him of the innocence of his client, and, indeed, would not convince him now were he not already convinced by the cards... His conviction could not be increased by his consideration of the evidence because he was already completely convinced. On the other hand, were his faith in the cards to collapse, then emotional factors which influence others would sway him too. Therefore the evidence which completely justifies his belief does not explain why he believes as he does, his faith in the cards explains that, and the evidence in no way supports... or partially explains why he believes as he does.⁴

Lehrer thus claims that the lawyer knows that his client is innocent even though the evidence which justifies his belief does not either prompt his original acquisition of the belief, nor does the evidence lend increased confidence in the belief once it is discovered, nor does the evidence at present sustain the belief. This last point is true in virtue of the fact that, if the influence of the cards were removed, emotional factors would hold sway and the lawyer would no longer believe that his client was innocent. Nonetheless the lawyer now knows and justifiably believes that his client is innocent of the eighth murder.

More recently, Lehrer has forwarded the case of Ms. Prejudice:

Imagine the case of Ms. Prejudice, who out of prejudice against a race believes that the members of the race who have a certain disease get the disease because of their genetic makeup. Of course, she, being very racist, believes this is a sign of their racial inferiority, and she is totally convinced because of her racism that the disease is the result of the genetic constitution of the race. Now imagine that Ms. Prejudice becomes a medical student and learns, to her pleasure, of the medical evidence that supports her prejudiced conviction. She becomes, however, a medical expert of the highest quality, fully capable of separating her prejudices from her scientific studies. As luck would have it, she becomes part of a research team assigned the task of checking on the genetic basis of the disease.... She wants to make sure it [the disease] really is [genetically caused], and she will force them [her co-investigators] to investigate with the greatest care every reason for doubting that the disease is genetically caused. She wants to make absolutely sure that she cannot be charged with concluding on the basis of the scientific evidence that the disease is genetically caused because of prejudice. Of course, her belief that the disease is genetically caused is the result of her still very intense prejudice, but her scientific evaluation of the evidence in favor of this belief must be rigorously tested.
The Epistemology of Keith Lehrer
Olsson, E. (Ed.)
2003, VII, 356 p., Hardcover