Explanationism, Circularity and Non-Evaluative Grounding

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Abstract

The present article examines two important challenges raised by Steup for explanationist accounts of evidential fit. The first challenge targets the notion of available explanation which is key to any explanationist account of evidential fit. According to Steup, any plausible construal of the notion of available explanation already presupposes the notion of evidential fit. In response to that challenge, an alternative conception of what it takes for an explanation to be available to a subject is offered and shown to be able to shed better light on the specific role played by that notion in explanationist accounts of evidential fit. The second challenge relies on the claim that the explanatory goodness of competing explanations is determined by their evidential fit, rather than the other way around. In response to that challenge, it is argued that explanationists can concede that the relative explanatory goodness of an explanation is in part dependent on that explanation's likeliness on the overall evidence possessed by the subject without thereby conceding that Explanationism about justification is circular.

Keywords

1   Introduction

Evidentialists take justification to depend on facts concerning a subject's evidential situation. More precisely, according to Evidentialism, the justification a subject has for believing a particular proposition depends on the evidence the subject possesses.[1] An important task for proponents of Evidentialism is therefore to provide an adequate account of evidential fit – that is, of the conditions under which a subject's belief fits the evidence she possesses.

According to one influential proposal, evidential fit is fundamentally a matter of explanatory considerations. Conee and Feldman, for instance, argue that (2008, pp. 97–98):

> The fundamental epistemic principles are principles of best explanation. Perceptual experiences can contribute toward the justification of propositions about the world when the propositions are part of the best explanation of those experiences that is available to the person. Similarly, the truth of the contents of a memory experience may be part of the best explanation of the experience itself. Thus, the general idea is that a person has a set of experiences, including perceptual experiences, memorial experiences, and so on. What is justified for the person includes propositions that are part of the best explanation of those experiences available to the person.

While Conee (2020) later distanced himself from that account, philosophers such as McCain (2013, 2014, 2015, 2017) and Poston (2014) have refined it in light of several challenges raised in the literature and have offered additional support in favour of it. According to the most recent version of the account defended by McCain (2015, 2017) – hereafter Explanationism – a subject with evidence e is justified in believing a proposition p whenever that subject has considered p and either p is part of the best explanation available to the subject for why she has e or p is available to the subject as an explanatory consequence of the best explanation available to her for why she has e.[2]

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1   Several proponents of Evidentialism operate a distinction between doxastic and propositional justification; propositional justification being taken as a property of the content of a subject's belief that depends entirely on its fit with the evidence. See for instance Conee and Feldman (1985, 2004).

2   McCain (2015, p. 339) defines an explanation H's explanatory consequence as a proposition p such that H would explain why p is the case significantly better than it would explain why $\neg p$ is the case.

In the present paper, my aim is to examine two important challenges Steup (2018) has raised for McCain's account of evidential fit. The reason for focusing on those challenges is two-fold. First, Steup's (2018) critique has a great level of generality as, if successful, it puts into question virtually every explanationist approach of evidential fit. Second, I believe that the interest of the challenges raised by Steup extends beyond the question of whether Explanationism is correct. Adequately meeting those challenges requires engaging with important issues regarding our access to explanatory theories, the connections between those theories and our evidence and the nature of the demands that ought to be met by any satisfying account of evidential fit. In Section 2, I present the first challenge raised by Steup for Explanationism which targets the notion of available explanation. Section 3 discusses a response to that challenge offered by McCain which is shown to be ultimately unsatisfying. An alternative conception of what it takes for an explanation to be available to a subject is then offered and relied upon to address Steup's challenge. Section 4 examines the second challenge raised by Steup for Explanationism which relies on the claim that the explanatory goodness of competing explanations is determined by their evidential fit rather than the other way around. In Section 5, after discussing the problems of McCain's response to that specific worry, I argue that explanationists can concede that the relative explanatory goodness of an explanation is in part dependent on that explanation's likeliness on the overall evidence possessed by the subject without thereby conceding that Explanationism is circular.

2   Challenge from Available Explanations

Following Goldman (1979), Steup (2018, pp. 361–362) argues that a satisfying theory of justification should ground that notion in non-normative and non-evaluative ones. For (Steup, 2018, pp. 361–362):

> If we wish to pin down what it is that makes a belief justified by offering a theory of evidential fit, it will not be informative to use notions that are part of the family of epistemically evaluative concepts. Rather, we must break out of the circle of epistemic evaluation.

In Steup's view, to constitute an informative account of evidential fit, Explanationism must thus break out of the circle of epistemic evaluation. Yet, because of the availability condition it involves, as well as the notion of

explanatory goodness it relies on, that account cannot, Steup claims, provide an informative elucidation of the notion of evidential fit.

According to Explanationism, a subject with evidence e is justified in believing a proposition p whenever that subject has considered $p,$ and either p is part of the best explanation *available* to the subject for why she has e or p is available to the subject as an explanatory consequence of the best explanation *available* to her for why she has e. To explicate the notion of evidential fit, Explanationism therefore operates a restriction among all the potential explanations of why a particular subject has e. The reason for this is quite simple. Unless such a restriction is in place, Explanationism has as a consequence that the evidence possessed by a subject can justify believing the content of some explanation of why she has e that is completely beyond the cognitive reach of that subject. After all, the best explanation of why the subject has e among *all* the potential explanations of why she has e might be an explanation whose content cannot even be grasped by the subject due to limited conceptual capacities. As a result, the notion of available explanation is crucial for Explanationism. Yet, according to Steup, there are good reasons to think that that notion is conceptually dependent on the notion of evidential fit, Explanationism is designed to explicate. To show this, he (2018, p. 365) considers three possible construals of the notion of available explanation in light of the following scenario:

> *Envatted Leader*: Suppose that aliens from a highly advanced civilisation visit earth in 1812 and envat Napoleon. It is intuitively correct that once he has been envatted, the explanation 'I am a BIV whose hand-experiences are caused by a sophisticated set-up consisting of a powerful computer program and tricky stimulations of nerve endings' is not available to Napoleon as a possible explanation of the experiences he is undergoing. Now the question is precisely why that explanation is not available to him.

A first possible answer is to claim that the BIV explanation is not available to Napoleon because Napoleon lacks the relevant knowledge (call this K-Availability). As he does not know anything about computers, an explanation stating that he is a BIV whose hand-experiences are caused by a sophisticated set-up consisting of a powerful computer program and tricky stimulations of nerve endings cannot be available to him. Alternatively, one could claim that the BIV explanation is not available to Napoleon because he has no evidence for the kind of things whose existence is entailed by that explanation

(call this E-Availability). As outlined by Steup (2018, p. 365), however, given each of these possible answers, the notion of available explanation turns out to be an epistemically evaluative one as the explanations available to a subject are either a matter of what she knows to be the case or are a matter of the evidence the subject possesses. Worse, under the reasonable assumption that propositional justification is a necessary condition on knowledge, each of these answers makes Explanationism circular for the very notion of evidential fit ends up being presupposed by that account.

To avoid such circularity, proponents of Explanationism could argue that the BIV explanation is not available to Napoleon because he lacks the relevant beliefs (call this B-Availability). For that explanation to be available to him, Napoleon would need to hold the belief, among others, that computers exist. As he does not, the BIV explanation cannot qualify as being available to him. Yet, while avoiding making Explanationism circular, that answer, when taken as providing the criterion for the availability of an explanation to a given subject, forces proponents of Explanationism to accept certain counter-intuitive consequences. To show why, Steup (2018, p. 365) considers the following situation:

> *Narcissistic Leader*: Suppose that Napoleon believes that he is the greatest general who ever lived because it seems to him that he is. What correctly explains why it seems to him that he is the greatest general who ever lived is that he is a narcissist and Napoleon has plenty of evidence in support of his narcissism. Yet, as he is a narcissist, he fails to believe that he is narcissistic.

If the availability of an explanation to a subject simply is a matter of what beliefs are held by that subject, then it seems that, because of his narcissism, the explanation stating that Napoleon is a narcissist is unavailable to him. But, if that explanation is not available to Napoleon, proponents of Explanationism are committed to the unplausible claim that the explanation stating that he is the greatest general who ever lived is the one that best fits Napoleon's evidence.

McCain (2018) essentially agrees with Steup regarding K-Availability and E-Availability. The notion of available explanation can neither be explicated in terms of what the subject knows nor in terms of what evidence the subject possesses on pain of circularity. McCain disagrees, however, concerning the fact that once these two options are off the table, proponents of Explanationism are bound to explicate the notion of available explanation in terms of what that subject believes. For McCain (2014) himself conceives of the conditions under which an explanation is available to a subject in terms of what the

subject is disposed to become aware of upon reflection on her evidence. More precisely, he proposes to explicate the notion of available explanation as follows (McCain, 2014, p. 67):

> **S-Availability:** At t S has p available as part of the best explanation for why S has e if and only if at t S has the concepts required to understand p and S is disposed to have a seeming that p is part of the best answer to the question "why does S have e?" on the basis of reflection alone.

This elucidation of the conditions under which some explanation is available to a subject manages to show, according to McCain (2018, p. 388), that the notion of available explanation can be explicated without reference to what the subject believes, knows or to the evidence she possesses. As a result, S-Availability appears to constitute a further option that may allow avoiding circularity as well as the type of complication raised by the Narcissistic Leader case.

3   Availability, Objectual Knowledge and Capacities

Although McCain's proposal does not make explicit reference to the beliefs held by a subject, one can wonder if it does not suffer from the same weakness as B-Availability. Recall the Narcissistic Leader situation. It might be argued that what Napoleon is disposed to be aware of upon reflection on his evidence depends, at least partly, on his being narcissistic and that, as a result, Napoleon is not disposed to have a seeming that the proposition 'I am a narcissist' is part of an explanation for why he has e. It is, however, important to note that, in McCain's view (2018, p. 388), what a subject is disposed to be aware of upon reflection on her evidence is not merely a matter of the (possibly unsupported) beliefs she holds. The relevant dispositions are fixed by the evidence possessed by the subject and, consequently, S-Availability is better equipped than B-Availability to deal with cases such as the Narcissistic Leader. One worry, though, is that given the role evidence plays in fixing the relevant dispositions S-Availability, like E-Availability, makes Explanationism circular. For it seems, after all, that given McCain's proposal the availability of an explanation to a subject is a matter of the evidence possessed by that subject.

Anticipating this worry, McCain claims that S-Availability does not, in fact, prompt any worry of circularity as "S's evidence isn't playing a normative role when it comes to fixing what is available to her. Instead, S's evidence is merely playing a causal role." (2018, p. 388). Hence, a subject's evidence does not

determine what explanation is available to her in virtue of supporting such and such claim. Instead, it disposes a subject, solely in virtue of its causal power, to be aware that such and such claim is part of an explanation of why she has *e*.

The viability of S-Availability as an answer to the challenge raised by Steup thus heavily depends on the plausibility of the distinction McCain draws between a normative and a causal role that evidence can play in fixing a subject's dispositions to be aware that such and such claim is part of an explanation for why she has *e*. Now, it should be clear that if a subject's evidence was constituted by propositions that are known by her or that she is justified in believing, the claim that that evidence fixes the subject's dispositions to be aware that such and such claim is part of an explanation for why she has *e* by playing a merely causal role would have little plausibility. If such a view of evidence was correct, then evidence's role in fixing such dispositions would naturally be understood in terms of the rational relations evidence bears to certain claims. Yet, this is not the view of evidence endorsed by McCain. In his (2014) view, evidence is best conceived of as being constituted by a subject's non-factive mental states, experiential states such as perceptual seemings playing a central role in the justificatory status of a subject's beliefs. Accordingly, the claim which S-Availability depends on should be understood as the claim that a subject's non-factive mental states dispose her to be aware that such and such proposition is part of an explanation for why she has *e* solely by playing a merely causal role. Is such a claim plausible?

There are reasons to doubt that, taken as purely causal factors, a subject's non-factive mental states suffice to account for the type of dispositions in terms of which McCain explicates the notion of available explanation. Taken as purely causal factors, Napoleon's non-factive mental states do not suffice to account for the fact that he is not disposed, upon reflection on his evidence, to be aware that the proposition 'I am a BIV whose hand-experiences are caused by a sophisticated set-up consisting of a powerful computer program and tricky stimulations of nerve endings' is part of an explanation for why he has *e*. Likewise, taken as purely causal factors, the non-factive mental states of a subject living nowadays do not suffice to account for the fact that she is disposed to be aware that that same proposition is part of an explanation for why she has *e*. To account for that disposition, it is necessary to make explicit the rational relations that the subject's evidence, conceived along a mentalist line, bears to certain claims. A subject's non-factive mental states might explain her disposition to be aware that the BIV proposition is part of an explanation for why she has *e* because these states are evidence for the existence of computers. But taken merely as causal factors, they are simply not suited to account for such a disposition.

If I am correct, then the complications raised by the Narcissistic Leader case cannot be avoided by relying on the claim that a subject's dispositions to be aware that such and such claim is part of an explanation of why she has *e* are fixed by the evidence she possesses. If those dispositions are fixed by her evidence, then the role her evidence plays in fixing them is normative. Note, however, that this does not yet show that S-Availability cannot meet Steup's challenge. Indeed, what accounts, intuitively, for the fact that a subject is disposed to be aware that such and such claim is part of an explanation for why she has *e* is the subject's knowledge of the explanation at issue rather than the evidence she possesses. Whenever a subject knows a particular explanation for why she has *e*, it is plausible that that subject is disposed, upon reflecting on her evidence, to be aware that the propositions part of that explanation are part of an explanation for why she has *e*. Naturally, if knowledge requires propositional justification, then accounting for the relevant dispositions in terms of knowledge is no better than accounting for those dispositions in terms of the evidence possessed by the subject. Yet, what intuitively accounts for a subject's disposition to be aware that such and such claim is part of an explanation of why she has *e* is a piece of objectual knowledge which might be best understood as a relation of acquaintance as opposed to a piece of propositional knowledge.

Farkas (2019) distinguishes two possible readings of knowledge ascriptions involving a noun clause, such as "S knows H" where H stands for an explanation of why S has *e*. According to the first reading, the construction expresses a relation of acquaintance between a subject and a particular object. According to the second reading, the construction really amounts to a know-wh attribution which can itself be interpreted as an attribution of propositional knowledge. Consider the following example discussed by Farkas (2019, pp. 265–266): "Meno knows the way to Larissa". While, at a surface level, that sentence appears to describe Meno's acquaintance with the way to Larissa, it is best interpreted as attributing a knowledge of which way leads to Larissa to Meno. Furthermore, attributing Meno with a knowledge of which way leads to Larissa can itself be seen as attributing Meno with a knowledge of the proposition that correctly answers the question "which way leads to Larissa?". What of the sentence "S knows H"? Plausibly, attributing a knowledge of an explanation to a subject amounts to attributing her with a knowledge of what that explanation states. This explains why such attributions can account for a subject's disposition to be aware that such and such claim is part of an explanation for why she has *e*. Now, this means, essentially, that the statement "S knows H" can also be understood as a know-wh attribution. Indeed, if attributing a knowledge of an explanation to a subject amounts to attributing her with a knowledge of

what that explanation states, then attributing a knowledge of H to a subject amounts to attributing to her a knowledge of the proposition that correctly answers the question "what does H state?".

Should we conclude that the only way for proponents of Explanationism to avoid making that account circular is to endorse B-Availability? I think not, for another option remains available. Recall the Envatted Leader case. In that scenario, Napoleon is not disposed to be aware that the proposition 'I am a BIV whose hand-experiences are caused by a sophisticated set-up consisting of a powerful computer program and tricky stimulations of nerve endings' is part of an explanation of the experiences he is undergoing. The reason for this is, presumably, that he does not know that explanation. But note that Napoleon, in such a situation, is not even able to come up with such an explanation and, I submit, this is precisely the sense in which the BIV explanation cannot be regarded as being available to him.

While it is tempting to think about available explanations in terms of the access a subject has to whatever constitutes an explanation of a target explanandum, I believe that this notion is best explicated in terms of the act of explaining itself and of the capacities required to engage in that activity. This is because it is reasonable to think that what makes an explanation of why a subject has e available to her is the subject's ability to explain why she has e by means of that explanation (call this C-Availability). Unless the subject is able to explain why she has e by means of a particular explanation, that explanation cannot be regarded as being available to her. Conversely, if the subject is able to explain why she has e by means of a particular explanation, there is no reason to deny that that explanation is available to her.

In order to show how this alternative construal of the notion of available explanation fares with respect to Steup's challenge, let me examine how it differs from the one that has been examined in the present section. According to C-Availability, an explanation H of why S has e is available to a subject whenever the subject possesses the capacities required to explain why she has e by means of H. How does this account differ from the one offered by McCain? One might argue that being disposed to be aware that such and such claim is part of an explanation for why a subject has e simply amounts to possessing the capacities required to explain why the subject has e by means of that explanation. Yet, the possession, by a subject, of the capacities required to explain why she has e by means of a particular explanation is not dependent on her being disposed to be aware that such and such claim is part of that explanation. Indeed, a subject can possess the capacities to explain why she has e by means of H prior to having any knowledge of H and, therefore, prior to being

disposed to be aware that such and such claim is part of H. As a matter of fact, it is often through the exercise of her capacities to explain why she has *e* by means of a particular explanation that a subject comes to know that explanation and be disposed to be aware that such and such claim is part of it upon reflection on her evidence. Thus, C-Availability is importantly different from S-availability. What needs to be determined now is whether it does not suffer from the same weaknesses as S-Availability.

C-Availability can easily deliver the correct results in cases such as the Narcissistic Leader. This is because, although holding specific beliefs might be required for a subject to be able to explain why she has *e* by means of a particular explanation, beliefs such as narcissistic beliefs do not impinge on that ability. While it might be argued that Napoleon's narcissism prevents him from being disposed to be aware that the proposition 'I am a narcissist' is part of an explanation for why he has *e*, his ability to explain why he has *e* by means of that explanation is quite independent of his narcissism. The fact that he is a narcissist does not make Napoleon unable to explain why he has *e* by means of an explanation stating he is a narcissist. Hence, C-Availability can easily avoid the difficulties raised by the Narcissistic Leader case. It is not clear, however, that it can avoid the types of difficulties raised in the present section for S-Availability. Indeed, one might argue that what ultimately grounds a subject's ability to explain why she has *e* by means of a particular explanation is the knowledge as well as the evidence possessed by that subject. After all, the reason why Napoleon lacks the capacities to explain why he has *e* by means of the BIV explanation in the Envatted Leader case is that he does not know anything about computers.

The claim that the possession by a subject of the capacities required to explain why she has *e* by means of a particular explanation depends on the knowledge and evidence she possesses has undeniably some plausibility. However, it is important to pay attention to the nature of the capacities at issue here. To possess the capacities required to explain why one has *e* by means of an explanation H amounts, essentially, to possessing the capacities to entertain certain kinds of thoughts: thoughts whose content can contribute to the explanation of why one has *e*. Because Napoleon does not know anything about computers, he is not able to entertain the thought that the reason why he has *e* is that he is a BIV whose experiences are caused by a sophisticated set-up consisting of a powerful computer program and tricky stimulations of nerve endings. Now, in light of this, one can legitimately wonder whether the worry just raised for C-Availability does not in fact concern any account of propositional justification. For, any plausible account of propositional justification relies on

the idea that a subject's justification for believing that *p* depends, in part, on the possession by the subject of the capacities required to entertain the thought that *p* and, for any *p*, it might be plausible that the possession of those capacities involves knowing certain truths and having particular evidence. Consider Napoleon in the Envatted Leader case. Any plausible account of propositional justification relies on the idea that unless Napoleon possesses the capacities required to entertain the thought that he is systematically deceived by a powerful computer, he cannot be justified in believing that he is, no matter what evidence he has. Napoleon's propositional justification for believing that he is systematically deceived by a powerful computer must therefore depend on his possession of the capacities required to entertain that particular thought.

Does it follow that any account of propositional justification is bound to be circular? I believe not. C-Availability sheds light, rather, on the fact that the notion of available explanation does not really contribute, in Explanationism, to explicate the notion of evidential fit. It seems quite problematic to conclude that any account of propositional justification is bound to be circular because it presupposes that a subject possesses the capacities required to entertain certain thoughts. And the reason for this is that the possession by a subject of the capacities required to entertain certain thoughts is not meant to be part of the explication of the notion of propositional justification. When one attempts to explicate the notion of propositional justification or evidential fit, one identifies the reasons why a subject is justified in believing a particular proposition given the thoughts the subject is able to entertain. The possession, by the subject, of the capacities required to entertain certain thoughts is not something that contributes to explicating the target notion, but rather something that fixes the general frame within which the target notion ought to be explicated. Now, when it comes to the notion of available explanation, C-Availability shows that this notion plays precisely that role in Explanationism. That account explicates the features that make a subject justified in believing a certain proposition given the thoughts the subject is able to entertain and these thoughts comprise thoughts that can contribute to the explanation of why the subject has *e*. Thus, the fact that the possession, by a subject, of the capacities required to explain why she has *e* by means of a particular explanation is grounded in further knowledge and evidence possessed by the subject does not threaten to make Explanationism circular. The notion of available explanation, in that account of evidential fit, merely fixes the frame within which the notion of evidential fit ought to be explicated without itself contributing to the explication of that notion.

4   Challenge from Good Explanations

Let me now turn to the notion of explanatory goodness. According to Explanationism, the justification a subject has for believing that *p* depends on *p* either being part of the *best* explanation available to the subject for why she has *e* or *p* being available to the subject as an explanatory consequence of the *best* explanation available to her for why she has *e*. The notion of explanatory goodness is therefore central to that account of evidential fit. Yet, according to Steup (2018), it is not clear that this notion does not already presuppose the very notion Explanationism is designed to explicate. In particular, Steup argues that in many cases, the relative explanatory goodness of the explanations available to the subject for why she has *e* is a matter of those explanations' fittingness with the overall evidence possessed by the subject.

To determine if a potential explanation H_i, if true, would explain why a subject has *e* better than another explanation H_j would, one proceeds by identifying and comparing the relative merits or explanatory virtues of each explanation. Here are four criteria of explanatory goodness considered by McCain (2014, p. 131):

> **Quantitative Parsimony:** All else being equal, an explanation that posits fewer individual entities is preferable to an explanation that posits more.

> **Qualitative Parsimony:** All else being equal, an explanation that posits fewer kinds of entities is preferable to an explanation that posits more.

> **Explanatory Simplicity:** All else being equal, an explanation that posits fewer fundamental explanatory regularities is preferable to an explanation that posits more.

> **Explanatory Questions:** All else being equal, an explanation that raises fewer unanswerable explanatory questions is preferable to an explanation that raises more.

It seems that by using such criteria, one can determine whether H_i, if true, would explain why S has *e* better than H_j would, without relying on the notion of evidential fit. One can judge whether H_i posits fewer individual entities, kinds of entities, fundamental explanatory regularities or unanswerable questions than H_j without the need to determine if H_i fits the overall evidence possessed by a subject better than H_j. However, as pointed out by Steup, things

get more complicated when certain cases are considered. Take the following situation (Steup, 2018, p. 367):

> *Futuristic Envattment*: Imagine a future, highly advanced society in which neuroscientists have mastered the technology for putting subjects in pods and deceiving them into having a seemingly normal life outside the pod. Enpodment (as opposed to envattment) is used for one, and only one, purpose: to improve the criminal justice system. Subjects found guilty of a crime and sentenced to long prison terms are put into pods, where they experience life in prison for a duration that fits the crimes they committed.

Steup imagines two denizens of that society. The first one, Gus, is living a normal life, whereas the second one, Brad, lives in a pod. While Brad is prompted to form various beliefs by the deceptive experiences he is undergoing in his pod, he remembers having committed a crime and having been placed in a pod. In addition, both Gus and Brad have a perceptual experience as of walking down a hallway, and each of them has at least two possible explanations for that experience. According to the first explanation, H_1, the subject is undergoing such an experience because he is walking down a hallway. According to the second explanation, H_2, the subject is undergoing such an experience because he is being deceived by neuroscientists into believing that he is walking down a hallway.

As Steup (2018, p. 368) outlines, H_1 clearly fits Gus's evidence but not Brad's, as he remembers having committed a crime and having been placed in a pod. But, in what sense is H_1 a better explanation of the evidence Gus possesses? It seems that this explanation is better because it is more parsimonious and explanatorily simpler than H_2. Yet, Steup argues, the features that make H_1 the best explanation of Gus's experience should also make that explanation the most parsimonious and the simplest explanation of Brad's experience as of walking down a hallway. When H_1 and H_2 are considered independently of the background of Gus and Brad's evidence, there seems to be nothing that warrants judging that H_1 is the best explanation available to Gus for his experience as of walking down a hallway, whereas H_2 is the best explanation available to Brad for his experience. This suggests that as mere explanations of the experience undergone by both Gus and Brad, H_1 and H_2 are on a par. What grounds the difference in explanatory goodness between H_1 and H_2 is each explanation's fittingness with the overall evidence possessed by Gus and Brad. That is, the reason why H_1 is the best explanation available to Gus for why he is

undergoing an experience as of walking down a hallway is that H_1 fits Gus's overall evidence better than H_2. Likewise, the reason why H_2 is the best explanation available to Brad for why he is undergoing an experience as of walking down a hallway is that H_2 fits Brad's overall evidence better than H_1. Thus, Steup claims, such a case shows that "evidential fit is not a function of explanatory goodness. It's the other way around: evidential fit determines explanatory goodness." (2018, p. 370).

If Steup is correct, Explanationism cannot be an informative account of evidential fit, as it relies on the very notion it is designed to explicate. Yet, according to McCain (2018, pp. 389–390), Steup is mistaken in thinking that the explanations available to a particular subject should be evaluated, *qua* explanations, in isolation from the overall evidence possessed by that subject. This is because, according to Explanationism, the data that stand in need of being explained consist of the subject's total evidence. Consequently, H_1, in the futuristic Envattment case, should be evaluated, *qua* explanation, as an explanation of Gus's overall evidence and not merely as an explanation of Gus' experience as of walking down a hallway. And, McCain argues, if H_1 and H_2 are evaluated as potential explanations of Gus and Brad's overall evidence as opposed to being evaluated as explanations of only a portion of that evidence, Explanationism is able to deliver the correct result. *Qua* explanation of Gus's overall evidence, H_1 is the best explanation available to him for why he has that evidence. Likewise, *qua* explanation of Brad's overall evidence, H_2 is the best explanation available to him for why he has that evidence.

5   Explanatory Goodness and Explanatory Loveliness

McCain and Steup are in agreement concerning the fact that the explanatory goodness of the explanations available to a subject for her evidence depends on the overall evidence possessed by the subject. However, they disagree on the role a subject's overall evidence plays in determining which explanation is the best the subject has for why she has *e*. According to McCain, *e*, in Explanationism, stands for a subject's overall evidence and, as a result, when the subject is justified in believing that *p*, the explanation containing *p* is always the best explanation available to her for why she has the totality of the evidence she possesses. In contrast, Steup considers potential explanations of why a subject has a portion of what constitutes her overall evidence and argues that, in many cases, evaluating the explanatory goodness of those explanations does not merely involve evaluating them *qua* potential explanations of that

portion of evidence. It involves, in addition, evaluating them as propositions or sets of propositions that fit the overall evidence possessed by the subject.

To understand the precise nature of the disagreement between Steup and McCain regarding the notion of explanatory goodness, I believe it is important to understand what reasons there are for thinking that competing explanations are best evaluated as potential explanations of a portion of the overall evidence possessed by a subject. Consider a slightly modified version of another case discussed by Steup (2018, p. 370):

> *Light Bulb*: Max is sitting in complete darkness because his desk lamp went out and no other light in his study was turned on. He has two rival explanations for why he has the evidence he has. The first, (H_3), states that 'the bulb burned out' and the second, (H_4), states that 'the fuse blew'. In addition, Max remembers having recently put a LED bulb in the lamp desk and the study fuse having a habit of blowing.

Taken independently of Max's overall evidence, H_3 and H_4 are equally good explanations of Max's experience as of his desk lamp no longer emitting light. It is only when these explanations are evaluated in light of the overall evidence Max possesses, which comprises his memories of having recently put a LED bulb in the lamp desk and of the study fuse having a habit of blowing, that H_4 can be deemed the best explanation. Yet it is important to note that H_3 and H_4 are not, strictly speaking, potential explanations of Max's overall evidence. Neither H_4 nor H_3 would contribute to explaining why Max remembers having recently put a LED bulb in the desk lamp and why he remembers that the study fuse has a habit of blowing. What each explanation would, if true, contribute to explain is only a portion of Max's evidence – *i.e.* Max's experience as of his desk lamp no longer emitting light. But, if H_3 and H_4 constitute potential explanations of only a portion of Max's evidence, how can these explanations be evaluated, *qua* explanations, in light of his overall evidence?

It is reasonable to think that the criteria of explanatory goodness put forward by McCain apply to an explanation in relation to the body of evidence that that explanation would, if true, contribute to explain. When two rival explanations are compared in light of their respective qualitative parsimony or explanatory simplicity, they are compared relative to the body of evidence each explanation could contribute to explain. If data that could not be explained by those explanations are used to evaluate them, the explanations at issue are no longer evaluated *qua* explanations. Instead, there is a clear sense in which they are being evaluated as propositions or sets of propositions that fit the data, and I believe that this is precisely the problem Steup is outlining when it comes

to the notion of explanatory goodness. *Qua* explanations, H_3 and H_4 are to be evaluated in relation to the portion of Max's evidence that these explanations could, if correct, contribute to explain. Evaluating those explanations in light of Max's overall evidence – that is, in light of data that go well beyond the scope of those explanations – amounts to evaluating their fittingness to Max's overall evidence.

These considerations suggest that, contrary to what McCain claims, Explanationism is bound to rely on the notion it is designed to explicate. Yet, prior to concluding that Explanationism cannot constitute an informative account of evidential fit, one should pay closer attention to the notion of best explanation. As outlined by Lipton (2004, p. 57), by "best explanation" one can mean either the available explanation that is the most likely to be true on the evidence (likeliest explanation) or the explanation that would provide the most understanding of the data standing in need of being explained (loveliest explanation). When it comes to Explanationism, it should be clear that the relevant notion of explanatory goodness is the notion of explanatory loveliness. Explanationists are not merely claiming that what makes a subject justified in believing that *p* is the fact that *p* is part of the available explanation of why she has *e* that is the most likely to be true on the subject's overall evidence. If they were, probabilistic considerations as opposed to explanatory considerations would be central to their account of evidential fit. Instead, they claim that the notion of evidential fit is fundamentally related to the notion of understanding and this, I submit, is key to seeing how Explanationism can constitute an informative account of evidential fit.

If the relevant notion of explanatory goodness, when it comes to Explanationism, is the notion of explanatory loveliness, proponents of Explanationism can concede that evaluating an explanation often involves evaluating its likeliness on the totality of the available evidence without thereby conceding that Explanationism is circular. Indeed, as understanding why something is the case plausibly requires having an explanation that is true or at least approximatively true, the likeliness of an explanation on the overall evidence possessed by a subject can be regarded as a symptom of its loveliness. That is, if understanding requires explanatory accuracy, then the fact that a given explanation is the likeliest on the available evidence can be taken as a sign of that explanation's ability to provide an understanding of the data that stands in need of being explained. But if Explanationism is right and the notion of evidential fit is fundamentally related to the notion of understanding, an explanation's fittingness with the evidence cannot itself be conceived of in terms of its likeliness on the available evidence. The fact that a given explanation is the likeliest on the

available evidence merely indicates that that explanation fits the evidence – *i.e.* that it would provide the most understanding of the evidence.

According to this line of response, Steup is wrong in thinking that evidential fit determines explanatory goodness. An explanation's relative likeliness on the overall evidence which is distinct from its fittingness to the evidence can determine its relative loveliness. But the notion of evidential fit, as explicated by Explanationism, remains a matter of which available explanation could, if correct, provide the most understanding of the evidence that stands in need of being explained and, therefore, Explanationism is not circular. However, as an explanation's relative likeliness on the overall evidence can determine its relative loveliness, that account, however, does not ground the notion of evidential fit in non-normative and non-evaluative notions. Indeed, the notion of an explanation's relative likeliness on the overall evidence, although distinct from the notion of evidential fit, is an epistemically evaluative one and given its potential role in determining an explanation's relative loveliness, Explanationism, according to the proposed response to Steup's challenge, is bound to rely on it. Consequently, Explanationism cannot "break out of the circle of epistemic evaluation".

It is not clear, however, that the fact that Explanationism does not ground the notion of evidential fit in non-normative and non-evaluative notions truly constitutes a serious challenge for that account of evidential fit. As already outlined, Steup (2018, pp. 361–362) considers that the satisfaction of Goldman's constraint is a necessary condition for an account of evidential fit to be informative. Yet, as just argued, although Explanationism does not satisfy this particular constraint, that account of evidential fit is not circular and therefore has the potential to be informative when it comes to the epistemic phenomenon it is designed to explicate. In fact, as pointed out by Strawson (1992) and Kelp (2021), the informativeness of a given philosophical account is not only dependent on the fact that that account analyses a complex phenomenon, such as the phenomenon of evidential fit by breaking it down into further elements which are independently intelligible. It also depends on that account's ability to explicate the function of different notions by highlighting the connections they bear to each other. Now, in light of the considerations put forward in the present section, Explanationism can typically be seen as an attempt to clarify the interconnection of important epistemic notions relative to the phenomenon of evidential fit. By showing that evidential fit is fundamentally related to the notion of understanding, Explanationism outlines the function of other evaluative notions, such as the notion of likeliness in the elucidation of the phenomenon of evidential fit. The mere fact that that account does not ground

the notion of evidential fit in non-normative and non-evaluative notions cannot be taken as the only criterion of informativeness.

6 Conclusion

The present paper examined two important challenges raised by Steup (2018) for explanationist accounts of evidential fit. The first one concerns the notion of available explanation which, according to Steup, presupposes the notion of evidential fit. The second concerns the notion of explanatory goodness which denotes, Steup argues, a property of explanations that is a function of their fit with the overall evidence. After having considered McCain's (2018) own response to the first of these challenges, I argued that the notion of available explanation is best explicated in terms of certain capacities possessed by a subject. More precisely, I argued that the availability of an explanation to a subject is determined by the subject's possession of the capacities required to explain a target phenomenon by means of that explanation and showed how this elucidation of the notion of available explanation sheds better light on the role it plays in Explanationism. Regarding the second challenge raised by Steup, I argued that proponents of Explanationism should concede that evaluating an explanation often involves evaluating its likeliness on the totality of the available evidence but that this does not amount to conceding that Explanationism is circular. If the notion of evidential fit is fundamentally related to the notion of understanding, as explanationists claim it is, then the notion of explanatory likeliness, although part of the explanationist explication of the notion of evidential fit, is distinct from that notion. While Explanationism does not ground the notion of evidential fit in non-normative and non-evaluative notions, that account is informative in that it illuminates the interconnection and respective function of important epistemic notions relative to the phenomenon it explicates.

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