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Justification

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The Concept of Justification

In the most general sense, the term “justification” refers to the act of providing reasons for the validity, legitimacy, and defensibility of (1) an action, (2) a belief, and/or (3) a social arrangement. Thus, justificatory practices – which may be described as reason-giving acts oriented toward demonstrating that something is right, cogent, and persuasive – emerge in relation to (1) empirical and behavioral, (2) conceptual and ideological, and/or (3) conventional and institutional processes and structures.

Epistemology and Justification

In the history of intellectual thought, the most prominent accounts of justification – notably their philosophical variants – focus on its *epistemological*, rather than its *sociological*, dimensions. Therefore, they tend to conceive of “justification” in terms of “the justification of beliefs” [2], rather than in terms of “the justification of actions” [1] and/or “the justification of social arrangements” [3].

Among the most influential epistemological theories of justification are the following:

- *Infinitism* posits that beliefs can be justified to the extent that they are situated within unlimited chains of reasons and reason-giving (Steup, Turri, and Sosa, 2014 [2005]: section 11; Turri and Klein, 2014).
- *Evidentialism* argues that beliefs can be justified to the extent that their cogency can be demonstrated on the basis of evidence, of which there are different forms (Aikin, 2014; Conee and Feldman, 2004; Dougherty, 2011; McCain, 2014).

- *Externalism* suggests that beliefs can be justified to the extent that they make reference to, and thereby implicitly or explicitly acknowledge their dependence upon, factors that are external to a person (Bergmann, 2006; Bonjour and Sosa, 2003; Goldberg, 2007; Kornblith, 2001).
- *Internalism* maintains that beliefs can be justified to the extent that they can be defended by virtue of a subject’s internal states or reasons (Bonjour and Sosa, 2003; Kornblith, 2001; Steup, Turri, and Sosa, 2014 [2005]: section 13).
- *Coherentism* affirms that beliefs can be justified to the extent that they cohere with other beliefs within a general system of beliefs, to which individual or collective actors subscribe in a regular, consistent, and categorical manner (Bouchard, 2002; Poston, 2014; Steup, Turri, and Sosa, 2014 [2005]: section 10).
- *Foundationalism* maintains that beliefs can be justified to the extent that they correspond to a set of core underlying assumptions, upon which practices, convictions, and norms are based and with respect to which they can be vindicated (Crook, 1991; Porter, 2006; Rockmore, 2004; Steup, Turri, and Sosa, 2014 [2005]: section 10).
- *Foundherentism* – a combination of foundationalism and coherentism – contends that beliefs can be justified to the extent that they are embedded in a system of both foundationally constituted and logically interconnected presuppositions (Haack, 2009; Steup, Turri, and Sosa, 2014 [2005]: section 10).

Sociology and Justification

From a sociological perspective, justifications cannot be dissociated from the *social contexts* in which the actors providing them are situated and to which they make implicit or explicit reference. On this account, justificatory practices develop in relation to and are embedded within (1) *empirical*

and behavioral, (2) conceptual and ideological, as well as (3) conventional and institutional processes and structures.

In the contemporary social sciences, one of the most important sociological approaches to justification is Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (2006 [1991]; compare 1999). This study contains crucial insights into the central role that processes of justification play in the construction of social life. It is based on the following assumptions:

1. Ordinary actors are equipped with critical, moral, and judgmental capacities. These enable them not only to provide justifications for their beliefs and actions, but also to participate in the construction of normative orders.
2. In modern societies, the epistemic spheres of "ordinary knowledge" and "scientific knowledge" overlap. As reflexive entities capable of justifying their beliefs and actions, both laypersons and experts are able to generate insightful knowledge about the objective, normative, and subjective facets of human existence.
3. In everyday life, justifications are both grammatically structured and performatively enacted. They are shaped by context-specific – that is, situationally variable – logics of rationalization, argumentation, and interpretation. At the same time, they are constantly evolving, implying that the degrees of acceptability they manage (or fail) to obtain are contingent upon the sets of circumstances in which they emerge and/or to which they refer.
4. When engaging in disputes, social actors are obliged to possess a certain degree of realism. Their capacity to be realistic in terms of what they can, and cannot, achieve in particular situations is a precondition for their ability to make judgments about – and, if required, to take decisions in relation to – specific issues at stake in different settings of interaction. The acceptability of actions, beliefs, and/or social arrangements can be confirmed or undermined by means of performative "tests" (*épreuves*), to which reason-giving subjects make reference when engaging in practices of justification.

Critical Theory and Justification

Habermasian versions of critical theory emphasize the civilizational value inherent in processes of justification. Since human beings are reason-giving entities, capable of engaging not only in speech and action but also in discourse and reflection (Habermas, 1993 [1991], 2003 [1999]), processes of justification play a pivotal role in the construction of social life. Given the socio-ontological centrality of these processes, notably with regard to the emergence of normative orders, it may be argued that human subjects possess a "right to justification" (Forst, 2012 [2007]).

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Further Readings

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