In what follows, I shall attack evidentialism. According to the classic formulation of Earl Conee and Richard Feldman (1985: 15), evidentialism is the doctrine that “the epistemic justification of a belief is determined by the quality of the believer’s evidence for the belief”. As I shall interpret it, this is equivalent to the thesis that the degree to which a believer is justified in believing a proposition \( p \) at a time \( t \) is wholly determined by the totality of the evidence that the believer has at \( t \). Of course, this doctrine would be trivially true if all that was meant by the phrase ‘the evidence that the believer has at \( t \)’ was “whatever determines the degree to which the believer is justified in believing the propositions that she has attitudes towards”. What I shall attack is the doctrine that what determines the degree to which a believer \( S \) is justified in believing a proposition \( p \) at a time \( t \) consists of something that could, without any misuse of language, be called, in a normal everyday sense of the word, the “evidence” that \( S \) has at \( t \).

More generally, I shall lodge a complaint about the uncritical use of the term ‘evidence’ in epistemology. Unless a precise meaning for this term is explicitly stipulated, the meaning that this term has in everyday life tends to smuggle in hidden assumptions; and as I shall argue here, these assumptions are highly questionable, and need to be explicitly scrutinized and defended rather than smuggled in incognito.

1. Bayesian “evidence”

There is one school of thought that commonly talks of “evidence” in a way that at least comes close to escaping all my criticisms – namely, the Bayesian school in formal epistemology.\(^1\) Theorists in this Bayesian school do in effect stipulate a technical meaning for the word ‘evidence’; and for the most part they consistently use the term with that technical meaning.

The key principle of the Bayesian approach to formal epistemology is that for every believer and every time, there is a probability function that captures the system of beliefs or credences that it is rational for the believer to have at that time. Given this principle, the evidence that the believer has at the time in question can be identified with a certain subset of the propositions that are assigned probability 1 by this probability function. Specifically, it is the set of propositions that have probability 1 according to this probability function, but do not have probability 1 according to all the probability functions that capture the beliefs and credences that it was rational for the believer to have at earlier times.

If these evidence propositions have probability 1 according to this probability function, but not according to all the probability functions that capture the beliefs that it was rational for the believer to have at earlier times, some event must presumably have occurred to shift the

\(^1\) Refs. Richard Jeffrey et al.
probability of those propositions up to 1. Such events can in general be called learning events. In short, according to Bayesianism, the believer’s evidence at \( t \) consists of all and only those propositions that have probability 1, according to the probability function that captures the credences that it is rational for the believer to have at \( t \), because of some learning event that occurs at or before \( t \).

There is certainly no problem with simply stipulating that one will be using the term ‘evidence’ in accordance with this definition. On this definition, however, most Bayesians are not “evidentialists” in the sense in which I am using that term. This is because these Bayesians do not accept that the beliefs and credences that it is rational for the believer to have at a given time is determined purely by the evidence that the believer has at that time. Most contemporary Bayesians think that the prior credences that the believer had immediately before this time are also part of what determines which beliefs and credences it is rational for the believer to have at this time. So, according to these Bayesians, the truth about the beliefs and credences that it is rational for you now to have does not supervene on the evidence that you now have. Another believer could have exactly the same evidence as you have, but – thanks to the other believer’s having different prior credences – the beliefs and credences that it rational for the other believer now to have could be quite different from those that it is rational for you now to have.

The only Bayesians who count as “evidentialists”, in the sense in which I am using the term here, are those who think that nothing other than the believer’s evidence makes a difference to what beliefs and credences it is rational for the believer to have. Some of these Bayesian evidentialists may take the maximally permissive view that any system of credences is rational so long as it is respects the evidence and is probabilistically coherent. Other Bayesian evidentialists might accept the “objective” idea of an a priori Ur-prior, of the sort that J. M. Keynes, Rudolf Carnap, and Timothy Williamson all in different ways appealed to.\(^2\) According to these “objective” Bayesians, there is a special privileged a priori probability function, and the probability function that captures the beliefs and credences that it is now rational for any believer to have at any time is simply the result of conditionalizing this special a priori probability function on the totality of the evidence that the believer has at that time.

Evidentialism (in the sense in which I am using the term here) is generally recognized as highly controversial among formal epistemologists in the Bayesian tradition. So, it would clearly not be fair to complain that these theorists’ use of the term ‘evidence’ has misled many of these theorists into accepting evidentialism itself. Nonetheless, as I shall explain here, the use of this term may have led some of these theorists into accepting some assumptions that should have been treated as more controversial than they recognized.

Formal epistemologists working in the Bayesian tradition have rarely addressed the question of what kinds of learning events can raise the probability of propositions all the way to 1 (according to the probability function that captures the beliefs and credences that it is rational for the believer to have). Within the context of the Bayesian theory, this is just an instance of a kind of problem that faces any theory that deploys a notion of “evidence” – namely, the problem of

\(^2\) Refs. Keynes, Carnap, Williamson.
giving an account of what it is for a proposition to be part of the “evidence” that a particular believer has a particular time. Many Bayesian theorists appear in effect to assume that they can just set the question aside – leaving it to be pursued by other philosophers who specialize in the question of what evidence is.

This assumption, however, is questionable. As I have claimed, Bayesians are in fact using the term ‘evidence’ in a special technical sense of their own. There is no reason to think that what counts as “evidence” when the term is used in a different sense, as it seems to be in other theories, will also count as “evidence” in the Bayesian sense. For this reason, then, the Bayesians do in fact need something that they have rarely supplied – an account of what evidence (in their sense) is, or in other words, an account of what learning events can raise propositions all the way to probability 1.

Even though it needs to be supplemented by a theory of learning events in this way, there is in principle no objection to the Bayesians’ using the term ‘evidence’ in this stipulatively defined sense. However, there are still a danger in their doing so. The meaning that the term has in everyday language can exert a hidden influence, seducing them into accepting assumptions that – given the stipulatively defined meaning that the term has in their theory – are in fact more questionable than they seem. In particular, the everyday meaning of the term ‘evidence’ makes it seem plausible that the acquisition of evidence is an ordinary learning event, of a common and familiar kind. This leads many Bayesian theorists to generalize, and to hypothesize that absolutely all learning events fundamentally take the form of the acquisition of evidence (in their technical sense of the term).

For various reasons, it also seems plausible to many of these Bayesian theorists that if the primary effect of a learning event is to give a certain set of propositions probability 1, then the rational way to respond to this learning event is by conditionalization. If the beliefs and credences of a perfectly rational believer always correspond to a probability function, then whenever new evidence is acquired, the perfectly rational believer will replace her old beliefs and credences with the result of conditionalizing this probability function on the new evidence that is acquired at that time. Since, as we have seen, many Bayesians suppose that all learning takes the form of acquiring new evidence, these Bayesian theorists also accept the view that this sort of conditionalization gives a correct and complete account of how rational belief-updating proceeds.

The problem with this view is that it in effect makes two assumptions. First, it assumes that all learning is learning with certainty: this is because on this view, all learning takes the form of acquiring evidence, and “evidence” is stipulatively defined to consist of propositions that have probability 1. Secondly, it assumes that the acquisition of evidence is strictly cumulative: this is because, if all belief-updating proceeds by conditionalization, once a proposition gets probability 1, it will continue having probability 1 from then on.

The first of these two assumptions is known to be controversial. Richard Jeffrey (refs.) famously argued that not all learning takes the form of learning with certainty. Jeffrey’s memorable example involved the experience of examining a piece of silk by candlelight: even if the
propositions that this experience fundamentally enables one to learn about are the propositions that the piece of silk is green, and that the piece of silk is blue, the experience may change the probabilities of these propositions without giving either of those propositions probability 1. Instead, Jeffrey proposed a different conception of learning, which is now generally known as “Jeffrey conditionalization”. On this conception, learning need not always take the form of “acquiring evidence”: the only correct general conception of learning is that it involves events’ imposing new constraints on the probability function that captures the beliefs and credences that it is rational for the believer to have – but these constraints need not require that any propositions should have their probability raised all the way to 1.

In this way, Jeffrey conditionalization represents a radical shift away from any kind of “evidentialist” framework: on Jeffrey’s conception, it is not just that the believer’s prior credences are among the factors that make a difference to what the beliefs and credences that it is now rational for the believer to have; it is also true that the learning event that triggers this belief-updating need not learning anything with certainty or acquiring any evidence at all.

In this way, the first of these assumptions – that all learning is learning with certainty – is undeniably controversial. Moreover (although the point is not so widely appreciated), the second of these assumptions – that the acquisition of evidence is strictly cumulative – is also controversial. One way to show this is to highlight cases in which it seems that evidence is not acquired in a cumulative fashion, but old evidence is lost even as new evidence is acquired. Some of these cases have been emphasized by theorists like Timothy Williamson (refs.); these are cases in which evidence is lost through forgetting. Other cases have been highlighted by theorists like Frank Arntzenius (refs.): these cases are somewhat harder to diagnose – but according to one possible diagnosis, they are cases where the content of the evidence is essentially indexical, and so ceases to be available even to be thought about after the time at which the evidence was acquired.

In spite of these controversies, a surprisingly large number of formal epistemologists are inclined to assume that classical Bayesian conditionalization gives a complete and correct account of rational belief-updating. It could be that one of the reasons why this assumption remains so widely held is that the everyday meaning of the term ‘evidence’ lends the assumption an air of plausibility that it does not strictly deserve.

In this section, I have discussed theorists who use the term ‘evidence’ in a stipulatively-defined technical sense. The main target of this discussion, however, are those theorists who aim to use the term in something that approximates to its everyday sense. Among these theorists, evidentialists are particularly prominent. It is these evidentialists whom I shall discuss next.

2. Evidentialism and foundationalism

According to evidentialism, the facts about whether or not a believer $S$ is justified in believing a proposition $p$ at a time $t$ are determined purely by the evidence that $S$ has at $t$. The facts about what evidence the believer has at a time $t$ are broadly speaking mental facts about the properties
of the believer’s mind at \( t \). So, in effect, evidentialism draws an invidious distinction between two aspects of what is going on in the believer’s mind at \( t \):

- First, there is the believer’s possession of evidence, which is what provides such justification as there is for the beliefs that the believer has at \( t \).
- Secondly, there are the beliefs that are justified by the evidence.

On this picture, the justification flows in one direction, from the mental states and events that constitute the believer’s possession of evidence, to the beliefs that are justified by that evidence. Almost like a social class distinction, this picture implies that some mental states are first-class states, which constitute the possession of evidence, while others are second-class, to be tolerated only if they can win the justificatory support of the first-class states.

This invidious distinction is the core idea of foundationalism. Any view that incorporates this core idea could be thought of as at least minimally foundationalist.

Now in fact, I believe that there is a way in which this minimal foundationalism can be viewed as acceptable. When we talk about the beliefs that a believer is justified in having at a certain time, we are focusing on the situation of the believer at that time, and assessing certain possible attitudes that she (the believer) might have towards various propositions that are available for her to have attitudes towards at that time. This simply reflects the fact that judgments about the justification of beliefs are normative judgments.

There is thus a distinction that between the facts about the believer’s situation that are just given to her and beyond her control, and the various alternative possibilities of having attitudes towards propositions that are “available” for her. It is the available alternative attitudes that are assessed as more or less justified, in relation to the facts about situation that are simply given to her and beyond her control. So, it seems that the facts about which attitudes the believer is justified in having at the relevant time must be determined by the facts about her situation that are fixed and beyond her control at that time. This is just the same distinction that we could draw when assessing what courses of action an agent may permissibly take – between the facts about the agent’s situation that are given to her and beyond her control, and the various courses of action that are available to her in that situation. The facts about what courses of action the agent may permissibly take, and which she should not take, are determined by the facts about her situation that are beyond her control.

What are the relevant facts about what is going on in the agent’s mind that are in the relevant way beyond her control at the relevant time, and determine which attitudes it is rational for her to have at that time? I do not have to answer that question here. Many philosophers – including those who are sympathetic to the Bayesian tradition in formal epistemology – would be inclined to think that these facts include at least the following two sets of facts. First, it includes the facts concerning the sensory experiences and other similar conscious states that the believer has at that time – that is, the conscious states that impinge exogenously on the believer’s system of beliefs from outside, do not arise from any sort of conscious reasoning, and are incapable of being revised through reasoning. Secondly, it also includes the facts concerning the beliefs and other mental states that were in the believer’s mind immediately before the time in question – which
are no longer under the power of the believer to change through the way in which she thinks at that time.

Clearly, evidentialists identify the facts about the believer’s cognitive situation that are fixed and beyond her control, and which explain what beliefs she is justified in having at that time, with the evidence that the believer possesses at that time. So, any evidentialists who allow that facts about the past beliefs and mental states that were in the believer’s mind immediately before the time in question form part of the facts that determine what it is rational for the believer to believe must also include these facts in the “evidence” that the believer has at that time. However, as I shall now argue, there are strong pressures in the everyday meaning of the word ‘evidence’ to deny that any such facts can be included in the agent’s “evidence”.

The reason for this is that in everyday language, “evidence” is what we appeal to in a conversation that discusses some disputed question (such as in a courtroom or a police investigation or the like) in order to support some particular answer to that question, and to show to the other participants in the conversation that the answer is correct. So, in ordinary language in order to count as “evidence” in favour of a certain answer to a question, a fact or proposition must be dialectically effective as supporting that answer to the question.

Now, if the question is whether \( p \) is true, it seems clear that ‘I believed \( p \) just a moment ago’ is not usually a dialectically effective proposition to appeal to in order to settle the question. Nor, for rather different reasons is \( p \) itself dialectically effective at settling the question: insisting on treating \( p \) as part of one’s evidence would in normal dialectical contexts seem like refusing to treat it as a question at all whether \( p \) is true.

For this reason, the ordinary everyday meaning of the term ‘evidence’ makes it seem that the fact that you had a certain attitude towards \( p \) in the past cannot count as “evidence” in favour of continuing having that attitude (or a similar attitude) towards \( p \) in the present. But according to evidentialism it is precisely the believer’s evidence that determines whether or not the belief in question is rational. So according to evidentialism, it seems puzzling how the fact that you believed \( p \) in the past can in any way help to make it rational for you to continue believing \( p \) now.

This is why a number of evidentialists have criticized the forms of conservatism about rational belief that have seemed attractive to many epistemologists. Roughly, according to these forms of conservatism, it is rational for us to rely on the beliefs that we held in the past in forming new beliefs; and in revising our old beliefs, it is rational for us to revise our beliefs in ways that conserve as much as possible of our old beliefs. (Bayesian conditionalization is one specific version of this view, since whenever we revise our beliefs by conditionalization we hold fixed our old conditional beliefs in all propositions, conditional on whatever we have just learned.) In short, evidentialism makes even the most plausible forms of conservatism seem mysterious. (Cite Christensen here.)

For this reason, evidentialism seems to support a stronger form of foundationalism than the kind that I have just mentioned. Specifically, it supports what we could call intermediate foundationalism. According to intermediate foundationalism, whenever a believer is justified in
believing a proposition \( p \), then (at least so long as \( p \) is not actually part of the evidence that the believer has at the time), this belief is justified by some “basis” that does not include any belief or doxastic attitude on the part of the believer – whether past or present – towards \( p \) itself.

This sort of intermediate foundationalism is incompatible with certain familiar versions of coherentism. According to these versions of coherentism, what justifies many of our beliefs is simply that they are held as part of an enduring coherent web of beliefs, which has survived the continual influx of new beliefs through experience. If one of these versions of coherentism is true, then the believer is justified in holding each of these beliefs now because it is part of a coherent system of beliefs that the believer has held in the past – but because of any “independent basis” as intermediate foundationalism would insist.

Moreover, evidentialism has also led a number of philosophers to accept what I shall call full-strength foundationalism. So far, I have been discussing propositional justification, the kind of justification that a believer can have for believing a proposition \( p \) even if she never actually believes \( p \) at all. Full-strength foundationalism is a thesis about doxastically justified belief – that is, about the state of believing a proposition in a rational or justified manner. According to full-strength foundationalism, for a belief in a proposition that is not itself part of the evidence to be doxastically justified, the belief must be cognitively based on the independent evidence that makes it rational.

Even though full-strength foundationalism still has many adherents, the problem with this sort of foundationalism is familiar. As Gilbert Harman (refs.) has pointed out, it is doubtful whether many of my beliefs have the kind of “independent basis” that foundationalism demands. For example, consider my belief that Madrid is the capital of Spain. What rational basis does it have? I have certainly long ago forgotten the original basis on which this belief was acquired. It seems that I continue to hold the belief precisely because it forms part of a coherent overall picture of Europe and its geography.

Some foundationalists may suggest that I hold this belief now on the basis of a “memory state” in which it “seems to me as though” Madrid is the capital of Spain. But that suggestion faces a dilemma. Either (a) this alleged “memory state” either just is my enduring belief that Madrid is the capital of Spain – in which case it obviously is not any kind of independent basis for that belief; or else (b) it is an event in which that enduring belief comes to mind – in which case it seems that it cannot plausibly justify the belief of which it is the coming-to-mind. For these reasons, the foundationalist has only two options. Either they deny must that my belief that Madrid is the capital of Spain is doxastically justified, or they must say that the proposition that Madrid is the capital of Spain is itself part of my evidence. The first response seems an implausible sort of scepticism about most of our ordinary beliefs.

So the only way for a foundationalist to avoid this sort of scepticism is to allow that a host of external-world propositions, like the proposition that Madrid is the capital of Spain, may form part of my evidence. But such views face an acute form of a problem that, in one form or another, affects all theories that deploy the notion of “evidence”: that is, they need to give some account what it is for a proposition to be part of one’s evidence at a certain time, in a way that is
consistent with their theory’s being plausible. But I do not appear now to be standing in any especially privileged relation to the proposition that Madrid is the capital of Spain: I am not for example currently perceiving or introspecting that Madrid is the capital of Spain. Presumably I do believe that Madrid is the capital of Spain in a way that makes me reliable about whether that proposition is true. But that will be true of so many of my beliefs – including many of my beliefs that are based on inferential reasoning – that it seems that the simplest and most plausible theory for such a theorist to give is the simple “reliabilist” theory of justification, according to which all justified beliefs are justified by the reliable process on the basis of which they are held.3 This reliabilist theory would have no need to appeal to a notion of “evidence” at all.

Even if this last problem for the full-strength foundationalist evidentialist can be solved, the main problems that I have raised in this section still stand. Evidentialism is questionable because it is in tension with plausible forms of conservatism and coherentism.

3. Overestimating the role of outright belief

There is a further problem with evidentialism that I wish to explore in this section. Admittedly, this problem does not arise for every version of evidentialism. In particular, it does not arise for the phenomenal conception of evidence, according to which a thinker’s evidence at a particular time consists of the true propositions about the conscious mental states that are in her mind at that time. On the phenomenal conception of evidence, for a proposition to be part of the believer’s evidence it does not necessarily have to the object of any attitude that the thinker has: it simply has to be a proposition of a certain sort that is true in virtue of how things are in the thinker’s mind at the time.

The phenomenal conception of evidence is widely regarded as providing the believer with an absurdly impoverished body of evidence, which is far too weak to support many of the propositions that we take ourselves to be justified in believing. Philosophers who recoil from the phenomenal conception usually jump to the opposite extreme, and insist that virtually all the propositions that are part of your current evidence are propositions about the external world.

However, it is clear that if an external-world proposition is to be part of a believer’s current evidence, the believer must currently have some relation to that proposition that makes this the case. Many philosophers have been strongly drawn to the supposition that this relation must be, or involve, some kind of belief.

It is again the ordinary meaning of the word ‘evidence’ that encourages this supposition. In the everyday sense, evidence is what can be appropriately appealed to in order to defend, and to persuade others of, a potentially controversial claim. What we appeal to is something that we take to be a fact – and so something that we believe. Specifically, the kind of belief that we have in the propositions that we appeal to as evidence in conversation is typically the kind of belief that can be called “full” or “outright” belief. This is the kind of belief that involves simply taking

3 Refs. Goldman.
the proposition in question granted – as some philosophers would say, simply treating it as true (rather than merely as probable) for all normal purposes.\(^4\)

Indeed, a number of philosophers have maintained – with some plausibility, it should be said – that the evidence consists of propositions that are not just believed, but known, by the relevant agents.\(^5\) What we appeal to in conversation to support or evaluate a claim seems, at least typically and normally, to be something that we take ourselves to know. Suppose that someone appeals to a proposition as evidence – say, to the proposition that the footprints in the mud match the unusual Prada shoes that the defendant is known to wear. If you then respond by saying, “Do we know that?”, you seem to be casting doubt on the proposition’s status as part of the evidence. Still, it is widely agreed that knowledge implies belief, and so I shall focus on the idea that the evidence that you now have must consist of propositions in which you now have some kind of belief.

The idea that the degree to which you are justified in believing the various propositions that we are interested in is determined purely by the facts about what you believe was defended by some philosophers – perhaps most notably, by Donald Davidson (refs.). But the idea is widely rejected. Most epistemologists think that other mental states besides beliefs form a crucial part of determining the degree to which one is justified in believing the propositions in question. In particular, one’s sensory experiences and episodic memories seem to play a crucial role in determining the degree to which one is justified in believing these propositions.\(^6\) On certain views about the epistemology of our beliefs about evaluative matters, our emotions and affective states, or perhaps certain special sui generis evaluative intuitions, also play a crucial role in determining what we are justified in believing, and to what degree.

In principle, it is possible for the evidentialists who are currently under consideration to accommodate these points, at least to some extent. They could, for example, say that your evidence includes all propositions in which you have a perceptual belief. However, these evidentialists cannot allow any role in determining the justification of our beliefs to any aspects of our sensory experiences that are not captured by the perceptual beliefs that we form on the basis of these experiences. This would leave out aspects of one’s experiences that raise the probability of certain propositions, in a way that cannot be explained purely on the basis of the “full” or “outright” beliefs that these experiences make it rational for one to have. For example, if Richard Jeffrey is right, the experience of examining the piece of silk by candlelight may raise the probability of the proposition that the piece of silk is green, in a way that cannot be explained purely by the way in which the experience makes it rational to have any full or outright belief. The evidentialists currently under consideration would have to reject this suggestion: if the probability of the proposition that the piece of silk is green is raised, this would have to be explained by some outright perceptual belief that the experience makes rational (such as the belief that the piece of silk is greenish-or-blueish or the like).

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\(^4\) Refs. Wedgwood 2012.
\(^5\) Refs. Williamson.
\(^6\) Refs. Pollock.
Some theorists may be happy with reducing the rational significance of sensory experience to the rational significance of perceptual belief in this way. However, there is another more serious problem. Quite generally, it seems doubtful that full or outright belief is the only kind of belief that matters for determining what attitudes it is rational for one to have. There are at least two other kinds of belief that seem vitally important as well.

- First, there are partial credences – levels of belief that involve uncertainty, and so fall short of full or outright belief.
- Secondly, there are conditional beliefs and credences – where each such conditional belief or credence is a broadly credal or doxastic attitude towards a pair of propositions $<p, q>$, in which one conditionally believes (or has some level of credence in) $q$, conditionally on the assumption of $p$.

Many theorists seek to reduce conditional beliefs to facts about unconditional beliefs. (The most famous reduction of this sort identifies your conditional degree of belief in $q$ given $p$ with the ratio between your degree of belief in $p \& q$ and your degree of belief in $p$.) As it happens, I am sceptical about whether any such reduction is in general correct. However, it is clear that the evidentialist cannot allow that the believer’s beliefs of either of these two kinds – let alone the prior beliefs of these kinds that the believer had in the immediate past before the relevant time – to play any role in determining the degree to which the believer is justified in believing the propositions that are in question.

This evidentialist stance is troubling because it seems quite possible for two believers to have full or outright beliefs in exactly the same set of propositions, and yet to differ with respect to their partial credences and conditional beliefs. Surely, this difference between these two believers could be relevant to what beliefs and credences it is rational for them to have?

The pressing worry about this, evidently, is that the set of propositions in which the believer has full or outright belief is an excessively impoverished basis for determining the whole truth about what she is justified in believing. A fortiori, every subset of this set of propositions – such as the set of propositions that one knows, or the set of propositions in which one has some special kind of full or outright belief – will be even more impoverished as a basis for determining the whole truth about what she is justified in believing.

The clearest example of the kind of view that is ruled out by this sort of evidentialism is, once again, the classical Bayesian approach. On that approach, the set of propositions in which the believer has a full or outright belief is not enough to determine the degree to which she is justified in believing all the propositions that she has attitudes towards. This is jointly determined by the believer’s “evidence” (in the Bayesians’ special sense) and by the believer’s prior conditional credences – including partial as well as extremal conditional credences. Even if what counts as the believer’s “evidence” in the Bayesians’ sense is included in what counts as “evidence” according to the evidentialists who are currently under consideration, it is clear that the believer’s prior partial conditional credences cannot form part of what these evidentialists regard as “evidence”. So these evidentialists’ position is irreconcilably opposed to the classical Bayesian approach.
If our prior partial credences and conditional credences do not guide us in responding to the new evidence that comes in, what could guide us in responding to this evidence? The evidentialists have to say that the evidence itself is enough to guide us. On certain views, the way in which the evidence guides us can be captured by means of a special “evidential” probability function, which maps each body of evidence onto the set of beliefs and credences that are justified by that body of evidence. Since this probability function captures how every body of evidence determines what the believer is justified in believing, regardless of whatever the precise content of the body of evidence may be, it is in a quite clear and precise sense a priori. In this way, it is clear why the evidentialists are compelled to follow Timothy Williamson in embracing the idea of a fundamental a priori Ur-prior probability function, which captures the general truth about how the evidence determines what beliefs and credences it is rational to have.

This idea of a special fundamental a priori Ur-prior probability function has been thoroughly examined and scrutinized for at least ninety years, ever since F. P. Ramsey’s (1926) critique of J. M. Keynes’s conception of “logical probability”. The central difficulty is just that it seems impossible to give a satisfactory account of what exactly this probability function is. If there were an a priori Ur-prior probability function, surely it would not be so hard to say what it is?

A number of the attempts that have been made to give such an account have appealed to the famous idea of the “principle of indifference” – the idea that in the absence of information, all the competing hypotheses should start out with equal probability. But the number of “competing hypotheses” seems to be infinite; and so it is unclear what it would even mean to assign equal probability to every one of these infinitely many hypotheses. The problems of understanding this have been known at least since the notorious paradox of Joseph Bertrand (1889). As Bertrand showed, there are many apparently equally reasonable ways of partitioning the space of possibilities into competing hypotheses, even though assigning equal probability to the competing hypotheses in any one of these partitions is inconsistent with assigning equal probability to the competing hypotheses in any of the other partitions. Although attempts are made from time to time to defend the principle of indifference against Bertrand’s paradox, it is safe to say that the principle of indifference is acutely controversial. Without the principle of indifference, it is hard to see how the idea of an a priori Ur-prior probability function can be substantiated; and without such substantiation, simply postulating the existence of this special privileged probability function seems like a magical invocation of a mystery.

The kind of evidentialism under consideration in this section seems best suited to a model according to which rational thinking always consists of basing conclusions on premises in which we have some kind of full or outright belief. But on reflection it should be clear that this is a woefully incomplete model of rational thinking. There are at least three respects in which it falls short of the full range of rational thinking of which we are capable:

- First, we need to distinguish between enduring mental states (like my long-enduring belief that Madrid is the capital of Spain) and mental events or processes (like the event of my revising my beliefs in a certain way at a certain time). It is not clear that long-enduring beliefs are “based” on anything at all.
Secondly, when we do engage in rational mental events and processes, we respond, not only to our full or outright beliefs, but also to our partial credences, and our sensory experiences and episodic memories, and many other mental states and events besides. Finally, the model is inadequate even for the case of inferences – since many inferences involve drawing conclusions from premises that are not believed but merely assumed for the sake of argument.

In general, the kind of evidentialism under consideration vastly overestimates the role of outright belief. Even if outright beliefs are an important and central part of our mental lives, rational thinking involves a very large number of other mental states, mental events and mental capacities and dispositions as well. The rational significance of these other mental phenomena is not captured by the rational significance of outright belief alone.

In these ways, then, the evidentialists under consideration in this section face a host of problems. The idea that evidentialism is simple common sense is extremely far from the truth.

4. The language of ‘evidence’

Here is a hypothesis about what has led the evidentialists astray. They have made a mistake about the meaning that the term ‘evidence’ has in everyday language. The central use of this term in everyday English is, as it seems to me, rather different from the way in which it is used in these philosophical discussions.

It is worth mentioning that very few languages actually have a word whose meaning corresponds to that of the English word ‘evidence’. The French word évidence and the German word Evidenz mean the property of being evident – that is to say, roughly, the property of being available to be known by all. What every language known to me has, by contrast, is a verb that means to show or demonstrate that something is the case. (Some languages that totally lack any term that corresponds to ‘evidence’, like ancient Greek, contain a remarkable number of such terms for showing that something is the case.) My basic hypothesis, to put it roughly, is that ‘evidence’ is fundamentally the English word for the material that can be used to show that something is the case.

The use of the English term ‘evidence’ as a term referring to rational grounds for belief seems to have come about through modelling the interior process of belief formation on the external dialectical process of showing that something is the case. The earliest clear case of this use of the term cited in the Oxford English Dictionary is, unsurprisingly, in the work of a philosopher – namely, J. S. Mill (1846: iii. xxi. §1): “Evidence is not that which the mind does or must yield to, but that which it ought to yield to.”

In ordinary English, however, as it seems to me, the term is most commonly used in dialectical contexts. These are contexts in which there is a collective discussion about what is the case – such as in police investigations (where the discussion is about who perpetrated a certain offence), or in legal proceedings (where the discussion is about whether the defendant is civilly or
criminally liable to a certain penalty), or scientific debates (where the discussion is about whether or not a certain scientific theory is true).

In these contexts, there is a question on which the participants in the conversation are trying to reach a collective answer, and certain other propositions are treated as belonging in the “common ground” – that is, as truths that all participants in the conversation are in a position to have common knowledge of. Some of these other propositions are of interest because they can be used to evaluate answers to the question that is under consideration; it is these other propositions – the ones that all participants are in a position to have common knowledge of – that are called “evidence”. The goal in these dialectical contexts is to achieve a rational consensus about the question under consideration, and to do so by means of considering the propositions that are regarded as “evidence”.

If this is how the term is used in ordinary English, it seems that for a proposition to count as part of the “evidence” in a given context it must be correct in that context to describe the proposition as one that the relevant speakers are in a position to have common knowledge of. It follows immediately that what counts as “evidence” in the context of one conversation may not count as evidence in the context of another. When you are speaking to one audience, you may treat the fact that certain audible words were uttered by a living human being rather than by a ghost as part of the evidence; in another context, when speaking to another audience, you could not treat the fact that these words were not uttered by a ghost as part of the evidence, but rather as something that has to be shown on the basis of other evidence.

If the correct theory of the meaning of the word ‘knowledge’ is contextualist – as I am inclined to believe – then the relevant features of the context will include, not just the individuals who are involved in the conversation, but many other factors as well – such as the needs and purposes that motivate the conversation, and the standards of justification and reliability that are salient in the context.

The word ‘evidence’ comes to be used in the way that has become common in philosophical circles because philosophers assume that rational believing is in all cases relevantly similar to an interiorized version of the sort of dialectical process that I have described. In fact, however, this assumption is eminently questionable. While there may be some cases of rational believing for which the model of an inner dialectical process is appropriate, it seems doubtful whether this model is appropriate for all rational beliefs. The model seems particularly questionable in the case of beliefs that we hold in an instinctive unreflective manner – like perceptual beliefs – or the entrenched background beliefs that we have not questioned for years – like my belief that Madrid is the capital of Spain – which do not seem to be held as a result of anything like an inner dialectical process of this sort.

The error that the evidentialist makes, then, is that of overgeneralizing a model that really only applies in a special domain. This, I propose, is the source of all the difficulties that I have canvassed above.
5. Conclusion

Given the meaning that the word has in every language, the word ‘evidence’ is a dangerous term to use in epistemology. It continually makes highly questionable assumptions seem much more plausible than they should. These problems are particularly acute for the philosophers who embrace the doctrine of evidentialism – the doctrine that it is one’s evidence alone that determines the degree to which one is justified in believing the propositions that one has attitudes towards. But as we saw in the case of the Bayesians, there are even dangers that beset the non-evidentialist epistemologists who make use of the term ‘evidence’ as well. We would be far better off in epistemology if we were much more cautious in our use of this term than we have typically been.