

Can an Internalist and an Externalist be Friends on the Question of Epistemic Justification?

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Abstract

This paper argues that internalism and externalism are two extreme epistemological positions, which when taken individually are not sufficient in properly addressing the problem of epistemic justification. Apparently, the most promising alternative available is to combine epistemic internalism and externalism into a comprehensive, integrative approach. Thus, the focus of this paper is that the safer view of epistemic justification will be the view that is able to accommodate both internalism and externalism in order to effectively handle the problem that bedevils each of the theories. The paper concludes that the best way to form a doxastic attitude and to justify our epistemic belief lies in forming a synergy between internalism and externalism.

Keywords: Internalism, externalism, epistemic justification, belief, relativism.

Introduction

One fundamental issue in epistemology is the question of epistemic justification. Obviously, epistemologists are interested in the matters of when (under what conditions) beliefs are justified, or the question of under what conditions would the epistemic agents be right to say that they know what they claim. Thus, one central problem that confronts any theory of epistemic justification is how to avoid vicious regress of justification in one's account of justification of empirical beliefs. Several epistemologists, with variant epistemological theories, have submitted their views and presented several accounts of epistemic justification on how they think the problem of epistemic justification can be best addressed.

There is an important division between two main types of account on this matter; that is, between the internalists and the externalists' theories of epistemic justification. According to the epistemic internalist, the question of epistemic justification depends primarily on factors that are internal to the believer's point of view, and/or factors to which the believer has special access. Thus, for De Rose (2005: 3), internalism is usually the position that *only or primarily* internal factors are relevant to, whether true beliefs constitute knowledge. The

epistemic externalist, on the other hand, claims that issues of knowledge and justification depend exclusively on such factors as how the belief was caused or how reliable is the faculty or mechanism by which the subject came to hold the belief- matters which are not in the requisite way "internal" to the subject's point of view.

My focus is to examine at epistemological internalism and externalism as two rival positions on the nature of epistemic justification. For each, effort shall be made to show where the judgment is misconceived and where the justifications offered are untenable. The paper shall conclude that the best account of epistemic justification is the one that accommodates both external and internal factors. This is what I called "middle ground argument" in this paper that is proposed as an epistemological position that will accommodate both internalism and externalism on the question of epistemic justification.

What is the Problem?

One of the main issues in the controversy between the externalists and the internalists is the problem of how to properly account for epistemic justification. Bonjour (2010: 36) sees the problem as an issue concerning the correct account or analysis of the supposed property of *epistemic justification*. Thus, what is it about justification? The third condition thought necessary for knowledge is justification. Generally speaking, justification is thought to be the reasons S has for believing *p*. The justification requirement was introduced for two specific reasons. The first was to prevent a lucky guess from being considered knowledge. For instance, X says, "I know that team A won the competition." But X has no way of getting this information; it was just a guess. This becomes problem because guess work cannot be regarded as knowledge. Thus, there is a need for justification. However, if it happens by chance that team A did win the race, in this case, even though X does have a true belief, we do not say he *knew* that team A won the race. It was only a lucky guess. Hence the need for a cognizer to have reasons for believing that which he is believes without further questioning. In X's case, if he did have some sort of justification, for instance, if he attended team A's training session, watched the competition or got the information from someone who watched the competition, then X might very well have knowledge that team A did win the competition. This insistence upon justification can originally be found in Plato's *Theaetetus*.

The second reason why justification is necessary for knowledge is borne out by the following example. It is possible for cognizer Y to have a belief *p*, which is true, but Y has ample

evidence to believe that p is not true. Y , despite the evidence, continues to believe p . In this case, one may be tempted to say that Y knows p when Y has reasons to believe p to be false. Y must therefore have reasons for believing p . that is, have some justifications for p , which will cancel the impetus for Y to discontinue believing p . Thus, this warrants the need for justification. Now, the next question is, how can an empirical believe be justified? Or how do we properly account for epistemic justification? Do we have to draw our justification from the inside or outside? To answer these questions, several theories of epistemic justification were developed to meet this challenge. The debate essentially started with foundationalism and coherentism in different versions and modifications. But for the purpose of this paper, the answer to this question is found in internalism and externalism' accounts as we shall next consider.

The Internalist Conception of Justification

Generally speaking, the internalists' minimum claim is that, the things that make beliefs justified or unjustified (call them justification factors) must be internal to the mind. Several scholars held variant views over this. Matthias Steup offers the following account:

What makes an account of justification internalists' is that it imposes a certain condition on those factors that determine whether a belief is justified. The condition requires [such factors] to be *internal to the subject's mind* or, to put it differently, *accessible on reflection* (Steup, 1996: 84).

The above explanation is in line with W. P. Alston's view. Alston is of the opinion that the accessibility or know ability constraint is taken to imply that only internal conditions qualify as legitimate determinants of justification. So, justification must be a purely internal affair (Alston, 1989: 236).

To know how internalism has been identified further, Laurence Bonjour writes:

The most generally accepted account ... is that a theory of justification is *internalist* if and only if it requires that all of the factors needed for a belief to be epistemically justified for a given

person are *cognitively accessible* to that person, internal to his cognitive perspective (Bonjour, 1992: 132).

Robert Audi writes:

Some examples suggest that justification is grounded entirely in what is internal to the mind, in a sense implying that it is accessible to introspection or reflection by the subject- a view we might call *internalism about justification* (Audi, 1998: 233).

In Alvin Plantinga's view, the basic thrust of internalism in epistemology, therefore, is that "the properties that confer warrant upon a belief are properties to which the believer has some special sort of epistemic access" (Plantinga, 1993: 6).

John Pollock writes that, internalism in epistemology is the view that only internal states of the cognizer can be relevant in determining which of the cognizer's beliefs justified (Pollock, 1999: 394) are.

Finally, Ernest Sosa characterizes one version of internalism this way:

Justification requires only really proper thought on the part of the subject: if a believer has obtained and sustains his belief through wholly appropriate thought, then the believer is justified in so believing - where the appropriateness of the thought is a matter purely internal to the mind of the subject, and not dependent on what lies beyond (Goldman, 1989: 145).

Fundamentally, from all these array of definitions of internalism offered above, one thing that is so certain. That epistemic justification factors must be internal and be accessible to the cognizer as a matter of necessity. In the same vein, Alston (1989: 236) argues that the "accessibility and the knowability" constraint is taken to imply that only internal conditions qualify as legitimate determiners of justification.

Nevertheless, is internalism a correct account of epistemic justification? It should be noted that the problem identified with internalism is more than that of externalism. Three of the arguments that have become standard against internalism are: (1) the problem of

relativisation (Vehling & Howard Wettstein, 1980: 6). This problem stems from the question of accessibility which some scholars tagged the problem of solipsism. (2) The argument that one can have justified beliefs and knowledge, even without satisfying the requirements of any plausible internalist account; and (3) the argument that internalism inevitably leads to scepticism. As Greco puts it, “internalism engenders regress problems and thus makes it impossible to advance an effective antiskeptical argument” (Greco, 2005: 268). The point is that, internalism has been severally criticized by epistemologists for not being able to properly account for epistemic justification. My focus in the paper is not to concentrate on the problems with internalism in the next section, effort shall be made to investigate the externalists’ account as well.

The Externalists’ Account of Epistemic Justification

Some epistemologists have argued in favour of internalism as seen above, that the factors that determine whether a subject has or has not met her duty of epistemic justification are internal. However, many epistemologists find at least one of these premises implausible. Alternative arguments for internalism focuses on proposed externalist accounts of justification. Such externalists’ accounts typically of epistemic justification in various ways. For instance, Dretske (2008: 333) define externalism in terms of conclusive reasons; Goldman (2008: 332), defines it in terms of reliability. While Nozick (2008: 255), in terms of truth tracking.

Externalism in general claims that issues of knowledge and/or justification depend exclusively on such factors as how the belief was caused or how reliable is the faculty or mechanism by which the subject came to hold the belief- matters which are not in the requisite way "internal" to the subject's point of view. Central to externalists’ thesis is the claim that justification should either turn a true belief into, or at least carry it good distance towards being, an instance of knowledge. Justification thus understood, must confer objective probability. Thus, it should be noted that objective probability is an external matter. It is not the kind of thing that is recognizable on reflection.

Nevertheless, Seteup (1996) noted the extremism of the externalists in their claim that, there is knowledge without internal justification. I consider this extreme claim a serious problem for the externalists because it is too exclusive and such a radical claim is difficult to defend in the face of serious critical scrutiny. By being exclusive, I mean such externalists’ position

does not involve or recognise any internal epistemic factor in forming doxastic attitude for justification.

The fundamental objection to externalism can be easily summarized. If we understand epistemic concepts as the externalist suggests we do, then there would be no objection in principle to using perception to justify reliance on perception and induction to justify reliance on induction. But there is no philosophically interesting concept of justification or knowledge that would allow us to use a kind of reasoning to justify the legitimacy of using that reasoning. Therefore, the externalist has failed to analyse a philosophically interesting concept of justification or knowledge.

One objection against externalism noted by Bonjour is,

An objection to externalist accounts of content is that they seem unable to do justice to our ability to know the contents of our beliefs or thoughts “from the inside”, simply by reflection. If content is dependent on external factors pertaining to the environment, then knowledge of content should depend on knowledge of these factors – which will not in general be available to the person whose belief or thought is in question (Bonjour, 2010: 368).

Haven considered both internalists’ and externalists’ accounts of epistemic justification with their attendant problems, we shall next consider the middle ground argument to see “how” and “why” it should be preferred over and above internalism or externalism when taking individually.

The Middle Ground Argument

If what has emerged in the above discussion is on the right track, then the problems confronting internalism are more serious than those confronting externalism from their individual extreme point of view. Nevertheless, can we use the theoretical tools of internalism and externalism individual extreme position to supply the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge and justified belief? Suppose each of these theories are taken individually, can they in their individual capacity properly account for a cognizer’s doxastic attitude? The attitude the cognizer takes toward the propositional content of her

belief is known as a doxastic attitude, the third aspect of belief. The answer is no. According to Sosa (1991: 181), both radical views are mistaken. Absolute powers of bodies are neither radically internal nor all radically external. The right view of such power lies between internalism and externalism. Let us call this middle ground argument.

For Lawrence Bonjour,

A theory of justification is *internalist* if and only if it requires that all of the factors needed for a belief to be epistemically justified for a given person be *cognitively accessible* to that person, *internal* to his cognitive perspective; and *externalist*, if it allows that at least some of the justifying factors need not be thus accessible, so that they can be *external* to the believer's cognitive perspective, beyond his ken. (Bonjour, 2010: 364).

Fundamentally, following Bonjour's line of thought, the locus of my proposed middle ground argument is that, for a theory of epistemic justification to provide a necessary and sufficient account, it requires that some of the factors needed for a belief to be epistemically justified for a given person be *cognitively accessible* to that person, i.e. *internal* to his cognitive perspective and at least some of the justifying factors need not be thus accessible, so that they can be *external* to the believer's cognitive perspective beyond his ken. In other words, the point that I am making is in line with John Turri's view. Turri (2009: 174) pointed out that: As far as I can tell, there is no instance where knowledge is gained without the subject exercising her intellectual powers. This will be well explicated in the next section where we intend to show the possibility of deriving internalism in externalism.

The Role of Internalism in Externalism: The Place of Friendship

In discussing the middle ground argument further, one problem for externalism is the difficulty of accounting for the place of internalism in justification. But this is not a crippling difficulty for some kinds of externalism, which need not restrict the role of internalism any more than is required by the regress argument. Indeed, although (pure) internalism grants nothing to externalism beyond perhaps its underlying psychological picture of how our belief systems are structured, externalism can account for some of the insights of internalism. For instance, the point that we need an internalist theory for the acquisition and function of

internal concepts is more positive, and can thereby answer one traditional externalist objection that it fails to guarantee epistemic access. What I suggest here is a kind of *mitigated externalism*. Mitigated Externalism will be a version of moderate externalism that will accommodate the minimum externalist claims without jettison the internalism, or an externalist view of knowledge or justification which: (1) takes the justification of external beliefs to be at least typically and not too exclusive; (2) which does not demand that principles governing the inferential transmission of knowledge or justification be deductive (i.e., require entailment as opposed to probability as a condition for transmission); and (3) allows a significant role for internal factors by requiring not that inferentially justified beliefs derive *all* their justification from external factors; but only that that they derive enough of it from the latter to remain justified if any other justification they have were eliminated.

Notably, the middle ground thesis suggests the need to employ a principle commonly emphasized by the internalists, by accommodating the external factors as well. Thus, externalists need not grant that the justification or truth of the principle that is purely based on internal factor, and will then tend to treat it as a transmission principle that will account for generation of inferential justification.

The point I am making is that, proper account of knowledge claim must combine both internal and external factors. In Robert Audi's (1988: 113) account, justification is grounded in what is regarded as *internal* to the mind and thus introspectively accessible to the subject—a view we might call *internalism about justification*—whereas knowledge is grounded, at least in part, in what is *external*, and hence not introspectively accessible to the subject—a view we might call *externalism about knowledge*. Following Audi's account, whether justification is grounded on internal factors or knowledge is grounded on external factors, whichever way it is conceived, one thing is so sure and fundamental. The thing is that any knowledge claim must require justification. Thus, the external factors rely to some degree on internal factors.

This kind of middle ground case was what Robert Audi had in mind when he writes:

... externalism may be maintained for justification, and a kind of internalism may be held to apply to knowledge. The plausible counterparts are not pure (or unrestricted) externalism about justification and pure (or unrestricted) internalism about knowledge. For one thing,

because knowledge entails truth it cannot be understood entirely in terms of internal variables, since no combination of these, however well it may justify a belief about the external world, entails the truth of that belief. And there appears to be some respect in which justification is internally grounded, even if it must also imply (say) some objective probability that justified beliefs are true. I propose to say, then, that internalism about knowledge is the restricted internalist view that knowledge is at least in part grounded in elements internal to the mind; and externalism about justification is the restricted externalist view that justification is at least in part grounded in elements external to the mind (Audi, 2011: 273).

Sincerely, if knowledge is basically a true belief about the external world apart from self-knowledge, one might be tempted to expect its justification to be essentially external. On the contrary, the justification of a belief does not necessarily entail its truth, as it seems to many scholars to rest on a source which is internal. Thus, one may be tempted to agree with Audi on this matter as his position finds complementary note in Turri's view. When Turri draws the conclusion that; "as far as I can tell, there is no instance where knowledge is gained without the Subject exercising her intellectual powers, knowing full well that intellectual power is internal" (Turri, 1992: 22).

Conclusion

This paper defended middle ground argument. This was not done with a view to supporting internalism or externalism, but however, in order to show that the best way to form a doxastic attitude and to justify our epistemic belief lies in forming a synergy between internalism and externalism. As Sosa (1991) rightly suggests, the right view to such power lies between internalism and externalism.

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