Can Our Senses Provide Sufficient Justification for Knowledge ?

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INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times humanity has been troubled by the question of how much we can trust our senses. Can we completely rely on them or are there lurking dangers? Philosophers have been occupied with this question for eons and have over the centuries given some very interesting theories. Aristotelians begin with the conviction that our perceptual and cognitive faculties are dependable and put us into direct contact with the features and the essence of our world so there is no need for us to be skeptical about them. Empiricists, likewise, claimed that knowledge can only be a-posteriori and must refer to something in the physical world which is precisely why our senses are our best source of attaining knowledge. Without them we would not be able to know the world around us and even though they may, in some cases, deceive us there are still the most reliable tool we possess. Rationalists, on the other hand, strongly argued that human beings have some form of intuition that is strongly connected with our rational nature and claimed that reason is a superior source of knowledge than our senses.[[1]](#footnote-1) A certain version of rationalism is associated with Descartes who denied that the senses reveal the true natures of substances. He held that in fact the human intellect can perceive the nature of reality through a purely intellectual perception. This means that, in order to procure the fundamental truths of metaphysics, we must “withdraw the mind from the senses” and turn toward our innate ideas of the essences of things, including the essences of mind, matter, and God.[[2]](#footnote-2) Adam Morton in his book “A Guide Through the Theory of Knowledge” suggests that humans would have died thousands of years ago if their senses and their ability to use the information they get from them were not generally accurate. This seems to be a reasonable claim given that ancient people tended to rely a lot more on their senses than us now and still somehow managed to survive. However, we can not also deny the claims that there are cases where our senses provide us with inaccurate apprehensions. Perhaps, though, these inaccurate apprehensions not only do not interfere with our species survival, but even better, enhance our ability to survive and adapt in the environment. The question that emerges is, can we truly justify our beliefs and if yes on what grounds are we supposed to justify them. Are we entirely influenced from our surroundings or is there something else deeper in play here? Justification Internalism holds that a person either does or can have a form of access to the basis for knowledge or justified belief. The key idea is that the person either is or can be aware of this basis. Justification Externalists, by contrast, deny that one always can have this sort of access to the basis for one's knowledge and justified belief and that we justify our beliefs based on the external stimuli that the world provides.[[3]](#footnote-3) The aim of this paper will be to explore the various arguments in favor of each side and through this try to establish my own view on the dilemma of “Can Our Senses Provide Sufficient Justification for Knowledge”?

INTERNALISM VS EXTERNALISM

Generally, when a person knows some proposition or other, he does so on the basis of something such as evidence, or good reasons, or perhaps some experiences he has had at some point in his life. The same is true of justified beliefs that may fall short of knowledge. Internalism and Externalism, as previously mentioned, are two sides debating on how we can truly justify our beliefs. In order to understand the debate, let us take into consideration the following example: Imagine that we know that the president of Greece is currently at Syntagma square as a result of some testimony from a relative of ours. The testimony of our relative acts as a justifier or, in other words, as a knowledge basis for our belief that the president is indeed at Syntagma square. Justifiers can be other beliefs, or experiences, or other facts that are related to the production of the belief. When we have a justified belief, we often are aware of the justifiers that accompany it and led us to believe in it in the first place. We can even argue that for any justified belief, we can be aware of the knowledge basis and reflect on it. That is precisely the idea behind Justification Internalism. Carl Ginet stated that “Every one of every set of facts about S's position that minimally suffices to make S, at a given time, justified in being confident that p must be directly recognizable to S at that time[[4]](#footnote-4).”. We can reasonably infer that Internalism claims that one can have a justified belief, let us call it b, only if one can become aware by reflection that some item k is an essential justifier for b. In the example given, our justified belief on the president’s location is based on our reflection of our relative’s testimony. Externalism denies one’s ability to always be able to reflect on the knowledge basis that leads him to the justified belief. An externalist would argue that the justification process is not based on justifiers but is rather a form of art that prevents a belief from being accidentally true. To make things clearer, let us take the example of Mary who is a Clairvoyant and one day her powers give her the information that she should go to the hippodrome and bet on the horse with the green outfit. Because Mary trusts her powers, she indeed bets on the horse and wins. An Internalist would say that her belief was doxastically unjustified [[5]](#footnote-5),because Mary failed to reflect on the justifiers that led her to this belief. On the contrary, the externalist would argue that it does not matter that she was unable to find the knowledge basis on which she decided, because in reality even if she had access to the justifiers, this still would not prevent her belief that is based on the basis to be accidentally true. [[6]](#footnote-6)To further understand the distinction, it is necessary to refer to the Brain in A Vat thought experiment.

BRAINS IN A VAT

This famous thought experiment supposes that it is possible for a brain to be stuck in a vat and held alive by some special liquid, while at the same time is connected to a large supercomputer that feeds it with stimuli and acts as its “body”. [[7]](#footnote-7)Furthermore, there can be a parallel world where all there is are brains in a vat and the supercomputer that feeds them. Imagine now the following scenario, we have two humans, Mark and Tim living in a parallel universe. Mark is lucky enough to live in the real earth and in his own body and experience the world, while Tim is a brain in the vat fed by the supercomputer. Mark sees a dog, his friends tell him there is a dog in front of him, he can hear the dog barking, he can pet the dog and thus, forms the belief that there is a dog in front of him. Since he is in the real world, it is true that a dog is indeed in front of him and he can cite his reasons, in other words his knowledge basis, for his true belief. An Internalist would be satisfied and would agree that his belief is indeed justified. Let us now consider Tim. Tim is a brain in a vat and experiences a world equivalent to that of Mark. Tim also sees a dog in front of him, he can smell it, his virtual friends are telling him the dog is in front of him and so on. Tim then forms the belief that there is a dog in front of him like Mark did. He has the same evidential basis as Mark, but his belief is false. Tim is short of knowledge, there is no real dog in front of him. Here lies the difference between Internalism and Externalism. An Internalist would argue that both Mark and Tim are equally justified in their belief about the dog, since what matters is internal access to the basing relation. However, according to Externalists the two of them are not equally justified. Mark’s belief is accidently true, because if he was a brain in a vat, like Tim, his belief would be false. Mark is lucky he is not in Tim’s situation, because no amount of access to internal justifying factors and reflection upon them would prevent his belief from being a product of mere luck. According to the Externalists, Mark was justified because he formed his belief based on the reliability of his perceptual systems, while Tim had no reliable system, in fact he did not have any systems at all since he had no body, he was a brain in a vat.[[8]](#footnote-8)

HILARY PUTNAM - BRAIN IN A VAT

Hilary Whitehall Putnam was an American philosopher, mathematician, and computer scientist, and a major figure in analytic philosophy who over the years contributed to the Internalist – Externalist debate. In his work Reason, Truth and History, which he wrote in his early days when he held the Internalist view, he mentions that the key difference between the two sides is their disagreement over the God’s Eye Point of View. Internalists deny that there can exist such a view, since for them truth is internal and that there can be more than one ‘true’ theory or description of the world. For Internalists ‘Truth’ is some sort of rational acceptability, some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system. There is no God’s Eye Point of View because there are only various points of view of actual person reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve.[[9]](#footnote-9) Consequently, an Internalist would deny the Brain in a Vat hypothesis because for him it is only a story, a linguistic construction, which is not a possible world at all. The idea that this might exist in another parallel world is assuming that the God’s Eye Point of View is real since there could be no observers in the brain in a vat world. However, as we mentioned for Internalists this is not possible, so they end up denying the existence of such a world. On the other side, Externalists who strongly believe in the God’s Eye Point of View cannot dismiss so easily the hypothesis that we are all Brains in a Vat. For the truth of a theory does not consist in its fitting the world as the world presents itself to some observer, but in its corresponding to the world as it is in itself. To illustrate this better, we can use as an example the peak of Mount Olympus. For an Externalist, the peak is there, it exists in the world regardless of who is there observing it. The Internalist would disagree and argue that the peak is there only because there are observers. Without the observers, without the reference there is no peak.[[10]](#footnote-10)

At an elder age Putnam mentions in an interview that in order to explain his opinion about the Brain in a Vat thought experiment he first needs to analyze two basic principles that he thinks govern our world. The first principle is that when we refer to something, we can refer to it because we are able to use language to extend the range of things we can refer to. We do not even need to have a causal contact with it, because we can describe it using primitive notions like the speed of light or place or distance. In the case of extraterrestrials, we can refer to them because we know what terrestrials are. However, we cannot know everything by description. There must be some basis of concepts that a human must understand without learning them by description. It is not necessary to be a certain basis that is the same for all people. The basic concepts can differ among individuals. When a small child begins to learn a language, it does not learn anything by description, so there must be some form of information carrying causal interaction with things that exemplify those concepts, which Putnam names causal constraint on reference. Putnam’s second principle claims that any sentence of the form ““snow” refers to snow” is always true. This is called the disquotational property of truth. Using those two principles, Putnam goes on and denies the possibility of the existence of the Brain in a Vat hypothesis, because, as he claims, it is not compatible with them. Putnam rephrases the question of if we are all Brains in a Vat into: do we speak English or Vat-English? If we were brains in a vat then we would not be able to frame a definition of a, for example, car because the concept of a car would be inaccessible. The word car for BIVs[[11]](#footnote-11) would still exist, but it would refer to bit cars, little information carrying strings to the computer. However, in our language the word car refers to a car. Therefore, we speak English and not Vat-English.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Although Putnam reached this conclusion, he could understand why many philosophers were not able to agree with his argument. As he says it has to do with whether we agree that we are semantically omniscient. As Descartes, who was a hardcore internalist, would argue, we know what a car is no matter what because this is part of the innate “furniture” of our minds. Putnam on the other hand believes that we are deeply dependent on our sense organs and reality is dependent on how we are embedded in the world.

PERSONAL REMARKS

Going back to the question at hand, I think that the exploration of the Externalism – Internalism debate can be quite helpful in tackling the issue of whether our senses can provide sufficient justification for knowledge. It is a fact that the human race has survived thousands of centuries based on its senses, which means that indeed the senses are giving us a somehow accurate representation of the world. It is also a fact, though, that there are many cases where we have been deceived by our sensory organs and have been led to inaccurate conclusions that often, not only did not hinder our ability to survive, but greatly improved it. Such inaccurate apprehensions could be the messages that were given to people by religion. For example, when there was a thunderstorm and huge waves outside, ancient Greeks believed that Zeus and the rest of the Gods were angry with them and that is why they refrained from travelling. This is an example of an inaccurate apprehension that was used to explain phenomena that ancient Greeks could not grasp, and at the same time protected them from harming themselves. It is like the ancient Greeks had some sort of intuition about what they should not do when such phenomena occurred. This view comes in parallel with the Externalist point of view which claims that we presume an externality as a condition of possibility for the intelligibility of what we think and know. In this case the perceptual systems were reliable and managed to justify instinctively a belief whose knowledge basis could not at the time be found. They still, however, justified it and even though their belief was false, it aided their survival. At the same time, when we begin to dig into deeper concepts, like the essence of our world, we find out that things are not as they seem. The more we dig, the more we find out that the world is strange and much different than what we thought. For example, we discovered that we cannot see the whole color spectrum, that there are people who cannot view colors[[13]](#footnote-13) , that the texture of objects around us is not what is seems to be and so on. Suddenly the Internalist perspective which claims that there are Internal truths, and that truth depends entirely on the observer starts to feel more attractive. The question that emerges is what is where can we draw the line? At which cases should we trust our instinct and completely rely on our senses to make a correct judgement and when should we reflect internally and try to find a secure knowledge basis that will lead us to a more sufficient justification for our belief?

At this point in order to explain my opinion I would like to add a bit of Kantian theory. Immanuel Kant was a great philosopher and one of the central Enlightenment thinkers that had a major impact in the fields of epistemology, metaphysics, ethics and aesthetics. Kant had a big dilemma to face, on the one hand he wanted to abolish the arbitrariness of the theologians by adopting a more skeptical approach, but on the other hand, he did not want to accept what he took to be the moral implications of extreme empiricism. To accomplish his goal, Kant introduced synthetic a priori truths. Synthetic a priori truths are synthetic propositions with material extension that we can know a priori. In other words, Kant claims that we can have knowledge of the world, real material extension, that can be universal and necessarily true, a priori. Kant also argues that these synthetic a priori truths are going to bring pure intuitions of objects under the Categories of thought, also known as pure concepts. As previously mentioned, Putnam also believed that there must be some sort of preexisting knowledge basis when he was talking about his principles in the Brain in a Vat theory. He argued that humans must be born with some sort of basis of concepts, something that they can understand without learning it by description. For Kant, this basis is all about the pure intuitions of Space and Time, which are not objects of experience, but objects that make experience possible in the first place. With that in mind, Kant wanted to abolish the God’s eye point of view, since the pure intuitions brought under the pure concepts are always mind dependent and necessarily presuppose an agent of knowledge. Furthermore, Kantian theory firmly believes that having correct or veridical representations of the world is identical to being able to effectively exist and live in the world. Therefore, for Kant it is meaningless to ask whether our knowledge conforms to the world, since all we have is our own judgment and it makes no sense to question whether our judgment of an object indeed corresponds to the object.[[14]](#footnote-14)

As we can infer, Kant agrees with Putnam and the externalists in the sense that humans have some form of intuition, a basis of concepts that is essential to our existence and allows us to meet the essence of this world. That is why I believe that our senses along with that intuition, can provide sufficient, and most of the time reliable, justification for at least our basic beliefs or what we can call Survival beliefs. These are beliefs that have almost become reflexes. For example, when there is cold, we just try and wear more clothes to warm up instinctively without trying to reflect on the knowledge basis. The same happens when we are experiencing something that causes us pain, we are urged to stay away from it. We can, most of the time, find a knowledge basis for these beliefs, but it is not even needed since if they are essential for survival, they are being processed so quickly that the justification process is indeed like a form of art that uses our senses to take the best course of action. Is this process different for every human organism? Yes, it is different since everyone is unique in their own way, and this is precisely what Descartes, Kant and other Internalists argued. Does it matter? No, it does not matter, since the justification process, while different for each person, is aiming towards the same thing, survival. Furthermore, is this justification sufficient? Yes, it is sufficient! Are the beliefs produced always true? Certainly not, as previously mentioned inaccurate apprehension can exist, but they are often limited and act in our favor. As Kant stated, having correct or veridical representations of the world is identical to being able to (effectively) exist and live in the world.

However, when we begin to dwell into more complex concepts like physics, chemistry, our preference in literature or even what video game we like the most, the same swiftness is no longer required. Our senses can indeed give us a certain input and provide initial reasons that may push us towards a certain belief, but since the issue at hand is not pressing us, we can seek the knowledge basis, reflect upon it, and find an answer that can both satisfy us and correspond to the justifiers. The sensory input does not play the same important role in the justification of more complex knowledge, as in Survival beliefs. Furthermore, the outcome of this reflection can differ for all of us. Our view of the world may be completely different, and this is perhaps one of the beauties of our reality.

CONCLUSION

All in all, I believe that our senses are justification tools that should be trusted and given the benefit of the doubt in cases related to survival, because even though they can produce inaccurate apprehensions the reason that they do it is because our brain’s number one priority is our own wellbeing and survival. Also, they are our connection with the physical world. As Putnam mentioned we can only know new things by reference and reference comes with sensory input, with experience. However, when we enter domains that are more difficult to explain, we must do more research and reflection upon our knowledge basis to ensure that we have sufficient justification. In other words, the more complex the situation, the more complex the justification process must be. Whether or not we reach a false belief, it does not matter, because it is up to a certain point impossible to know. What matters is to try and judge each situation as well as we can and reach the best possible conclusion with the information given. Over the decades there were many beliefs about various topics. Those with the best justifications were preserved and carefully examined from the descendants that then contributed their own ideas and so on. This is a vicious circle that will keep happening until the end of mankind and our sensory organs are a necessary but not infallible tool that we are lucky to possess.

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