

Knowledge and Reality, Lecture 05

Brian Weatherson

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1/38

Review

Internalism and Externalism

Why Internalism

Why Externalism

2/38

Testimony

- We spent the last two classes on testimony, and in particular on when it is rational to believe something on the basis of testimony.

3/38

Two Theories

- Testimony is basic, and rationally believing testimony requires just an absence of reasons for doubt.
- Testimonial belief is inferential, and rationally believing testimony requires reason to think the speaker is telling the truth.

4/38

Today

- What kind of thing is rationality?

5/38

Terminology

- The writers we'll look at move back and forth between talking about **rational** belief and **justified** belief.
- I'm not going to get into whether these are different, or what the differences might be.
- Treat them as the same, knowing that, as always, it might be more complicated than that.

6/38

Review

Internalism and Externalism

Why Internalism

Why Externalism

7/38

What Does Rationality Depend on?

Imagine that one person is rational, and another irrational.

- How must they differ?
- Could they be internally alike?

8/38

Internalism

Rationality is a function of what's internal to the person.

- Two people who are internally alike are either both rational, or both irrational.

9/38

Internal?

What does 'internal' mean here? Two prominent options (which I'm stating but won't go into)

1. Physical, e.g., brain states, sense organs, etc.
2. Phenomenological, e.g., feelings, sensations, etc. This is sometimes called **access internalism**; rationality just depends on what the thinker has access to.

10/38

How Does It Depend?

Again, two big theories, though these aren't exclusive or exhaustive.

1. Evidential; rationality is a matter of having beliefs based in the right way in evidence, which (on this view) is a special kind of internal state. Sometimes this is called foundationalism.
2. Coherence; rationality is a matter of internal states cohering.

11/38

How Does It Depend?

We'll come back to this, because some of the objections to internalism target just one or the other theory.

12/38

Review
○○○○○

Internalism and Externalism
○○○○○○●○○

Why Internalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Externalism
○○○○○○○○○○○

Externalism

Externalism is simply the denial of internalism.

- It says that sometimes internal duplicates differ in rationality.

Review
○○○○○

Internalism and Externalism
○○○○○○●○○

Why Internalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Externalism
○○○○○○○○○○○

Strong Externalism

A really strong form of externalism says that only external factors matter to rationality.

- This is not a popular view, though the Srinivasan paper we'll read next comes very close to defending it.
- But external here typically means "not exclusively internal".

Review
○○○○○

Internalism and Externalism
○○○○○○●○○

Why Internalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Externalism
○○○○○○○○○○○

Process Reliabilism

The most popular form of externalism these days is **process reliabilism**. This has two parts.

- In general, rational beliefs are those that are produced by reliable processes.
- But there is an exception; beliefs that fail some internalist test might be 'defeated', and not rational.

Review
○○○○○

Internalism and Externalism
○○○○○○●○○

Why Internalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Externalism
○○○○○○○○○○○

Process Reliabilism

Process reliabilism is most associated with Alvin Goldman, a former professor here at UM.

- Indeed, I think some of the most important statements of it were from his time at UM.
- Another important figure (who we'll read in a related context soon) is the Cuban-American philosopher Ernest Sosa.

Review
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Internalism and Externalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Internalism
●○○○○○○○○○

Why Externalism
○○○○○○○○○○○

Review

Internalism and Externalism

Why Internalism

Why Externalism

Review
○○○○○

Internalism and Externalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Internalism
●○○○○○○○○○

Why Externalism
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Three Reasons

This is an enormous debate, but I'll pull out three reasons that I think are significant.

1. Anti-luck.
2. Cases.
3. Evil Demons

Review ○○○○○	Internalism and Externalism ○○○○○○○○○	Why Internalism ○○●○○○○○○○	Why Externalism ○○○○○○○○○○○
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Anti-Luck

- Saying something is rational is a way of saying that it's not a lucky guess, and if it's false, it's unlucky.
- External factors are basically matters of luck.
- So rationality should depend only on internal factors.

19 / 38

Review ○○○○○	Internalism and Externalism ○○○○○○○○○	Why Internalism ○○●○○○○○○○	Why Externalism ○○○○○○○○○○○
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Cases

Lawrence BonJour introduced the following kind of case.

- A person has (somehow) acquired clairvoyant powers.
- They have these beliefs about distant parts of the world that just come to them.
- And these beliefs are true.

20 / 38

Review ○○○○○	Internalism and Externalism ○○○○○○○○○	Why Internalism ○○○○●○○○○○	Why Externalism ○○○○○○○○○○○
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Question

1. Is simply trusting this new clairvoyant sense rational for the person?
2. If not, is this a problem for reliabilists.

21 / 38

Review ○○○○○	Internalism and Externalism ○○○○○○○○○	Why Internalism ○○○○●○○○○○	Why Externalism ○○○○○○○○○○○
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Evil Demon

The evil demon usually comes into epistemology as part of an argument about scepticism.

- E.g., you don't know you're not being deceived by an evil demon, so you don't know that you have hands.
- But here is gets used for a debate about rationality.

22 / 38

Review ○○○○○	Internalism and Externalism ○○○○○○○○○	Why Internalism ○○○○○○●○○○	Why Externalism ○○○○○○○○○○○
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Sympathy for the Devil (Victim)

Imagine a person who seems, from the inside, to be just like an actually rational person.

- But in fact they are the victim of an evil demon, so their beliefs are all false.
- Reliabilists say they are irrational, but they are intuitively rational.

23 / 38

Review ○○○○○	Internalism and Externalism ○○○○○○○○○	Why Internalism ○○○○○○●○○○	Why Externalism ○○○○○○○○○○○
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Question

What should reliabilists say about this case?

24 / 38

- Imagine two evil demon victims.
- A is, from the inside, a paradigm of rationality.
 - B is, from the inside, a conspiracy theorist who leaps to conclusions, believes everything he's told, etc., etc.

Can reliabilists say something about the intuitive differences between A and B?

- Review
- Internalism and Externalism
- Why Internalism
- Why Externalism

- Again, there are many, but I'll just look at these three.
1. Speckled hen
 2. Why care about rationality?
 3. Involuntarism



How many visible white speckles?

- The right answer does just depend on your internal states.
- But it seems that any number you came up with by just guessing would not be a rational belief.
- So rationality requires more than internal states, it requires a reliable connection to the world.

Review
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Internalism and Externalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Internalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Externalism
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Why Care?

- Rationality should be something we care about.
- But if given a choice between being evidence-responsive, and being reliable, we should choose being reliable.
 - And same for coherent versus reliable.

Review
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Internalism and Externalism
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Why Internalism
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Why Externalism
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Why Care?

- Belief, in some sense, aims at the truth.
- Rationality means something like doing well in believing.
- So, being rational should mean something like doing well in getting to the truth.
- That means reliability.

Review
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Internalism and Externalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Internalism
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Why Externalism
○○○○●○○○○○

Why Care?

Are there hand-wavy moves on the previous slide that might not hold up to strict scrutiny? Yes!

Review
○○○○○

Internalism and Externalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Internalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Externalism
○○○○●○○○○○

Voluntarism

- We evaluate the voluntary parts of human behavior by whether they make sense, and the involuntary parts by whether they work.
- Belief is involuntary.
- So we should evaluate it by how well it works.

Review
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Internalism and Externalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Internalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Externalism
○○○○○○○○●○○○

Somewhat Concessive

- This argument concedes that if belief were voluntary, internalism would be plausible/correct.
- But, it says, belief is involuntary.

Review
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Internalism and Externalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Internalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Externalism
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Evaluation

- Whether someone has, say, a good or bad digestive system is not a strictly internal matter.
- Having a good digestive system just is being good at digesting common foods.
 - And what the common foods are is external.
 - The involuntarists say belief is the same.

Review
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Internalism and Externalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Internalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Externalism
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Two Objections

1. Belief really is voluntary.
2. Enough things connected to belief are voluntary that we can use something like internalist criteria.

Review
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Internalism and Externalism
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Why Internalism
○○○○○○○○○

Why Externalism
○○○○○○○○○●

For Next Time

We'll look at a very recent contribution to this debate, Amia Srinivasan's argument for externalism from cases involving oppression.