

Is Justification Internal?

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1. Internalism vs. Externalism in Epistemology

This week's debate focuses on whether 'internalism about epistemic justification' holds:

[I] Whether a belief is justified for an agent S is determined entirely by factors that are internal to S's perspective.

By contrast, 'externalism about epistemic justification' is the negation of this claim—justification is determined by at least some factors that are external to S's perspective. Greco (p. 258) points out several interesting features of [I]:

- Internalism about justification is a very strong claim. Internalists¹ hold that justification is *entirely* an internal matter. Even a position where justification is predominantly but not fully internal counts as externalist.
- Epistemic justification is only one of many epistemic statuses that one can be an internalist or externalist about. Beliefs can be justified, rational, accurate, responsible, coherent, reasonable, count as knowledge, and so on. One can be an internalist about justification and still be an externalist about knowledge.
- Different strands of internalism will depend on which factors are considered *internal to S's perspective* – e.g., factors to which S has privileged access, particular occurrent mental states, causal relations between mental states, and so on.

Another point worth emphasizing at the onset is that whether or not a philosopher accepts [I] is often, but not always, deeply connected with their particular views on *knowledge*.² Indeed, Feldman (p. 271-4) sees the internalism-externalism debate as roughly parallel to the debate between defenders of traditional 'good reasons' analyses of knowledge and defenders of 'causal' analyses of knowledge. For the 'good reasons' theorist, the justification required for knowing that *p* is having good reasons to believe that *p*, where these reasons include how things look, memories, other beliefs, etc. Since reasons are internal on this view, Feldman takes the 'good reasons' theorist to be an internalist about epistemic justification. For the 'causal' theorist, however, knowing that *p* requires that one's belief that *p* is the product of a reliable cognitive process, or that particular causal connections exist between one's beliefs and states of the world. So Feldman takes the

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, 'internalism' = 'internalism about epistemic justification' and 'internalist' = 'internalist about epistemic justification.'

² Of crucial importance, considerations of justification can be separated off from considerations of knowledge (see Section 5). But both Greco and Feldman work under the assumption that the appropriate notion of justification relevant to the question 'Is justification internal?' is the type of justification that is required for knowledge.

‘causal’ theorist to be an externalist about epistemic justification.³ Far from being a peripheral issue in epistemology then, the internalism-externalism debate lies at the very center of our theories of knowledge.⁴

2. Three Arguments for Internalism

Greco presents and rebuts three different arguments for internalism about epistemic justification. None of his rebuttals are very convincing (as Feldman helps show), but nor are the arguments themselves.

2.1 The Deontological Argument

P₁: A belief that *p* is epistemically justified for a person *S* just in case *S*’s believing that *p* is epistemically responsible.

P₂: Epistemic responsibility is entirely a matter of factors that are internal to *S*’s perspective.

C: Epistemic justification is internal.

Greco rejects P₂. He argues that epistemic responsibility is tied to the notions of epistemic blameworthiness and praiseworthiness and whether an agent is blameworthy or praiseworthy for believing that *p* depends on the etiology of that belief – in a slogan: ‘etiology matters.’ Take Maria, for example, who believes Dean Martin is Italian because she has a clear memory that this is so, though she originally formed this belief on the basis of testimony from her mother whom Maria knew is an unreliable source in such matters. Despite the fact that Maria has forgotten the source of her belief, Greco thinks she is blameworthy for currently believing that Dean Martin is Italian given her prior negligence. And since Greco seems to think that this prior negligence is an external matter, assessments of epistemic responsibility involve external factors, so P₂ fails.

However, it is not clear that this is the correct analysis of the Maria case. As Feldman points out (p. 282-3), an internalist can insist that of the cognitive attitudes that Maria can currently take towards the proposition ‘Dean Martin is Italian’, believing it is surely the only sensible option. If this is correct, Maria is responsible for believing that Dean Martin is Italian despite the problematic etiology of this belief.⁵ So P₂ need not fail after all. Moreover, even if the internalist concedes that Maria is irresponsible for believing that Dean Martin is Italian, the fact that Maria *knew* her mother was unreliable indicates that her belief was originally unjustified according to Feldman’s ‘good reasons’ account. So if Feldman’s internalist extends her conception of justification to include past internal states – say, a belief that *p* is justified if the agent currently has good reasons for *p* and did not

³ That is, if the ‘causal’ theorist even conceives of beliefs that are the products of reliable mental processes, say, as *justified* beliefs. If the term ‘justification’ is reserved for good reasons, then according to Feldman, “the controversy between internalists and externalists is, in its initial formulation, over whether knowledge requires justification.” (p. 274)

⁴ But the debate extends beyond our theories of knowledge. See footnote 2.

⁵ It is implicitly assumed here that there is some attitude – believing, disbelieving, or suspending judgment – that Maria can responsibly take towards the proposition that ‘Dean Martin is Italian’.

have good reasons not to believe that p at the time of origin – then the internalist can still explain why Maria is epistemically irresponsible without appealing to external factors. Again, P_2 need not fail.

Greco has a second line of attack. He also claims that only beliefs based on good reasons are praiseworthy. So a mathematician who believes Euclid's axioms, believes that the interior angles of a triangle sum to 180 degrees, but believes this theorem because her parrot told her to, is epistemically irresponsible even though she does have good reasons for her belief. Similarly, a traveler who has good reasons to believe that he will arrive at his destination on time but actually believes this due to wishful thinking is epistemically irresponsible. Again, etiology matters in determining epistemic responsibility and since Greco takes 'agent S believes that p for good reasons' to be an external fact, P_2 fails.

Unlike in the Maria case, the internalist cannot appeal to past internal states to deflect this second attack on P_2 . Nonetheless, the internalist might still take 'agent S believes that p for good reasons' to be internal. Since reasons are internal, believing something for good reasons, rather than because of wishful thinking or because one's parrot told you to, is a causal relation between internal states. So if causal relations between mental states are considered internal to S's perspective, the internalist can agree with Greco's analysis of the mathematics case (i.e., that the mathematician is irresponsible) but still deny that this threatens P_2 . Without a further argument for why such causal relations cannot be accommodated on the internalist picture, Greco's second objection to the deontological argument is unconvincing.

In any case, there is a deeper worry with the deontological argument that Greco ignores. Ironically, the worry is simply put by the internalist Feldman: "the view that epistemic facts depend on internal facts is logically distinct from the view that epistemic facts are in some sense matters of duty." (p. 277) In other words, the internalist need not be committed to a deontological account; an internalist conception of justification need not involve fulfilling obligations and duties, or blameworthiness and praiseworthiness. The real problem with the deontological argument is thus with P_1 rather than with P_2 . Without a compelling argument for why epistemic justification *just is* deontological justification, the use of deontological considerations to support internalism about epistemic justification cannot work.

2.2 The Like Believers Argument

P_1 : If agent S and agent S' have the same internal perspective, then agent S and agent S' are alike in terms of epistemic justification.

P_2 : If agents with the same features X_1, \dots, X_n are alike in terms of epistemic justification, then epistemic justification is entirely a matter of (some subset) of X_1, \dots, X_n .

C: Epistemic justification is internal.

Greco rejects P_1 . His argument here is similar to his rebuttal of the deontological argument: since the etiology of the beliefs of S and S' may differ, S and S' need not be

alike in terms of epistemic justification, and hence epistemic responsibility, even though they have the same internal perspective.

Again, the internalist can reply that if by ‘etiology’ we are concerned with facts of the form ‘S believes that p for good reasons,’ it is not clear that the etiology of beliefs is external. If believing for good reasons is an internal matter, then agents with the same internal perspective will have beliefs with the same etiologies so will be alike in terms of epistemic justification. Furthermore, even if we grant that etiology, in this sense, is external, Feldman (p. 280) still argues that the Like Believers Argument holds once we distinguish between ‘justification’ – having good reasons to believe – and ‘well foundedness’ – believing for good reasons. Though agents with the same internal perspective will differ in terms of epistemic well foundedness, they will not differ in terms of epistemic justification.⁶

There are, of course, other ways to understand ‘the etiology of belief’. And on these other readings, P_1 clearly fails. If in thinking about the etiology of a belief that p , we are concerned with whether the belief is the product of a reliable cognitive process, or whether the belief was caused in a particular way by some feature of the world, then agents with the same internal perspective *will* have beliefs with differing etiologies. If we, like Feldman’s ‘causal’ theorist, also think that such etiologies are relevant to epistemic justification, then agents with the same internal perspective *can* differ in terms of epistemic justification. So P_1 fails. But unlike Greco’s rebuttal that appeals to epistemic responsibility, there are no claims here about the carelessness, thick-headedness, praiseworthiness, etc. of epistemic agents. The Like Believers Argument simply fails because P_1 presupposes a notion of justification that Feldman’s causal theorist – an externalist – rejects.⁷

2.3 The Skepticism Argument

P_1 : The externalist has an easy answer to skeptical worries while the internalist does not.

P_2 : Answering the skeptic cannot be easy.

C: Epistemic justification is internal.

In questioning how we can know anything about the external world, the skeptic insists, among other things, that one can know things via sense perception only if one knows that one’s perceptual faculties are reliable. The internalist attempts to meet the skeptic’s

⁶ The distinction between ‘justification’ and ‘well foundedness’ is also relevant to the above discussion of the deontological argument. For Feldman, the mathematician’s belief in the Interior Angle Theorem is justified but not well founded. This suggests that P_1 is false and should be replaced by: ‘A belief that p is epistemically well founded for a person S just in case S’s believing that p is epistemically responsible.’ However, this point was ignored in our discussion given the more basic worry that internalism and deontology can come apart.

The distinction between justification/well foundedness also raises the worry of whether the conception of justification we are left with, i.e., ‘justification’ = ‘having good reasons’, is of any philosophical interest. This is discussed in Section 3.

⁷ Indeed, P_1 is part of Conee and Feldman’s (2000) *characterization* of internalism, rather than an argument for internalism itself.

challenge head-on by showing how we can be justified in believing that perception is reliable from within our own perspective. The externalist, by contrast, holds that sense perception gives rise to knowledge so long as sense perception *is* reliable, whether an agent knows this or not. The Skepticism Argument says that the externalist does not give a satisfying reply to the skeptic. So externalism is false.

Greco's response to this argument is essentially to replace P_2 with P_2^* : Answering the skeptic cannot be hard. He argues: "if one concedes internalism then it is *impossible* to give a satisfying reply to traditional skeptical concerns." (p. 263) To show this, Greco reconstructs Hume's skeptical arguments and claims that the internalist cannot challenge them. But this response is unsatisfying as it ignores the plethora of work by philosophers to address skepticism without resorting to the externalist line. As things stand, it is far from obvious that the internalist cannot meet the skeptic's challenge in a satisfactory way.

Despite this, the Skepticism Argument is not convincing. For rather than replace P_2 with P_2^* , we can resist P_2 . Why can't a reply to the skeptic be easy? Shouldn't the externalist's ability to circumvent skeptical worries count in her favor?

3. Is Justification Interesting?

To summarize so far, none of Greco's rebuttals of the Deontological Argument, Like Believers Argument, and Skepticism Argument are satisfying, but nor are the arguments themselves. Greco, however, has one last trick up his sleeve. His final argument is a general one against internalism (simpliciter), not just against internalism about epistemic justification. He argues that given our aim as social, information-sharing cognitive agents to identify reliable information sources, the only epistemic evaluations that are interesting will concern the accuracy of beliefs, etiology of beliefs, or both. Since accuracy and etiology are, for Greco, external matters, "all interesting epistemic evaluations are externalist evaluations." (p. 269)

Greco's radical conclusion, in its full generality, is false. As Feldman (p. 277-8) points out, there are internal epistemic evaluations, such as consistency and an agent's ability to identify good reasons for her beliefs, which are interesting. Of course, whether an epistemic status is 'interesting' is highly ambiguous and it is unclear that we can even make sense of an independent notion of 'interestingness' that can do the work that Greco wants it to. But the mere fact that Feldman himself, along with many other philosophers, finds consistency interesting seems enough to refute Greco's full-blown conclusion.

That said, the claim that 'no interesting epistemic status is internalist' is overly dramatic. A more relevant question seems to be whether *any* internalist conception of justification is interesting. But even this seems tangential to the present debate. If an internalist conception of justification isn't interesting, why does this matter? The question we are considering is whether justification is internal, not whether justification is interesting. Greco's 'interestingness argument' against internalism is thus a *non sequitur*. One can, like Feldman, be an internalist about justification while still denying that justification is

of much philosophical interest. So in the end, Greco has yet to give us any good reasons to think that justification is not internal.

4. Defending Internalism

On the other hand, Feldman's essay in *Contemporary Debates* does not present any arguments that justification *is* internal. Fortunately, a positive case for internalism is made in Conee and Feldman's (2000) 'Internalism Defended'. In this earlier paper, the authors present six different contrastive epistemic situations – where one agent has a justified belief while the other does not, or one agent's belief is better justified than the other's – and argue that the epistemic differences are best explained by differences in the agents' internal perspectives. For example:

A novice bird watcher and an expert are together looking for birds. They both get a look at a bird in a nearby tree. (In order to avoid irrelevant complexities, we can assume that their visual presentations are exactly alike.) Upon seeing the bird, the expert immediately knows that it is a woodpecker. The expert has fully reasonable beliefs about what woodpeckers look like. The novice has no good reason to believe that it is a woodpecker and is not justified in believing that it is.

Comment: The epistemic difference between novice and expert arises from something that differentiates the two internally. The expert knows the look of the woodpecker. The novice would gain the same justification as the expert if the novice came to share the expert's internal condition concerning the look of woodpeckers. (p. 5)

Since the six cases (including a Gettier case) are taken to be representative of *all* epistemic situations, Conee and Feldman conclude that "every variety of change that brings about or enhances justification either internalizes an external fact or makes a purely internal difference. It appears that there is no need to appeal to anything extramental to explain any justificatory difference." (p. 6)

Later in the essay, the authors also respond to various objections to internalism. In doing so, they demonstrate how an internalist can account for the justification of stored (i.e., non-occurrent) beliefs, the connection between internal justifiers and the beliefs that they are supposed to justify, and other things. The thrust of Conee and Feldman's overall argument, then, seems to be that since internalism has intuitive appeal and can explain all matters related to epistemic justification without appealing to external factors, we should all be internalists.

But even if internalism is explanatorily adequate, why does internalism provide a *better* explanation of justificatory matters than externalism? As discussed earlier, Feldman's causal theorist, influenced by her ideas about knowledge, thinks that justification is external, whether the internalist has an alternative explanation of the same justification patterns or not. It's unclear how internalism's explanatory power alone can convert the externalist. So Feldman (along with Conee) still hasn't given us any persuasive reasons to be an internalist.

5. Pluralism about Justification

My own crude conjecture is that the question ‘Is justification internal?’ is misguided. For this question implicitly assumes that there is only one type of justification that is either internal or external. Now if, like Greco and Feldman, we take epistemic justification to be the type of justification required for knowledge – in Goldman’s terms, what carries a belief ‘a good distance towards knowledge’ – then there may very well be only one type of epistemic justification after all (e.g., having good reasons). However, epistemic justification *need not be associated with knowledge*. We might, like Pryor, say that a belief is epistemically justified whenever it is epistemically appropriate to hold it, without conceding that epistemic appropriateness is constitutively a prerequisite for knowledge.

In fact, once we divorce justification from knowledge, the epistemological landscape opens up to multiple forms of justification. I see no reason why one cannot be a causal theorist and favor an external conception of epistemic justification – call it justification₁ – in one’s theory of knowledge while still acknowledging that an agent can be justified in another sense – call it justification₂ – by being guided by good reasons in a way that is independent of knowledge. To be sure, allowing for competing notions of justification will make epistemic evaluations thorny. But rather than seeing this additional complexity as a problem for ‘pluralism about justification’, I think the coexistence of different notions of epistemic justification just goes to show that epistemology is a far richer field than many philosophers care to admit.

6. Externalism and Truth

To transition to next week’s debate on whether truth is the primary epistemic goal, it’s worth discussing one last point. In Cruz and Pollock’s (2008) ‘The Chemical Appeal of Epistemic Externalism’, the authors contend that taking truth to be the overall normative aim of belief is responsible for much of the appeal of externalism about epistemic justification. For truth-aimers, “externalism has a strong *prima facie* attraction, as properties of epistemic agents that are truth-aimed – like the actual reliability of their cognitive processes – are (in at least an intuitive sense) external to the cognitive agent.” (p. 2) The basic insight seems to be this: justified belief and true belief must co-vary so justification should have truth-aimedness built-in; and since truth-aimedness is associated with external factors, externalism holds.

Cruz and Pollock think that externalisms built around truth-aimedness are a mistake. In addition to criticizing various externalist proposals (Goldman, Plantinga), they also argue that if we insist that justified beliefs must be mostly true, then “[w]e would end up insisting that most of what was believed about the natural world for the last 6000 years was not only false but also irrational. Worse, we would be in the position of thinking that our own scientific beliefs about the world are irrational, since we have some inductive reason to think that they are probably false.” (p. 16) For now, I won’t go into more details. I just wanted to flag the connection between truth-aimedness and externalism for next week’s discussion.